

CHARLES LAHIGUERA

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Lahiguera]

Q: Today is July 25, 2000. This is an interview with Charles Lahiguera. Does your last name have anything to do with war? What does it mean?

LAHIGUERA: It means a fig tree.

Q: A fig tree, okay.

LAHIGUERA: My name is actually Garcia Lahiguera.

Q: Garcia Lahiguera. All right. Could you tell me when and where you were born?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I was born April 1938 in New York.

Q: In the city?

LAHIGUERA: In Queens.

Q: In Queens, okay. Tell me something about your family on your mother's and your father's side.

LAHIGUERA: Well, my father was actually a Spanish Foreign Service Officer. He was the political officer in the embassy in Spain at the time I was born. My mother had immigrated to the United States as a young girl. She was from Germany. She was an American citizen at the time. The Spanish civil war was going on and my father was representing the republic here. After my birth we had broken relations with the republic and recognized Franco. My father took a job at Williams College in 1940. Of course I don't remember that time.

Q: Well, let's talk a bit about the family, your father's background, a family in Spain.

LAHIGUERA: Well, my grandfather, whom I never knew (he died when my father was very young) was in the north of Spain. He married my grandmother in Navarre. He was managing an anise liqueur business which went belly up and he ended up teaching physics in Madrid.

Q: How did your father get, did he tell you how he got into the diplomatic trade?

LAHIGUERA: I don't know the details.

Q: But, you were obviously in the United States and was he in the embassy in the United States?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, he was the number two there.

Q: And your mother?

LAHIGUERA: She had been born in Germany. She came over when she was around 16. Her father was a grammar school principal. My father had been assigned to Vera Cruz at the Spanish consul and they were actually married in Mexico. He was then assigned to Washington and concurrently worked in the consul general in New York. She was an American at the time.

Q: So, when the United States recognized the Franco regime?

LAHIGUERA: He was out of a job.

Q: Out of a job.

LAHIGUERA: Unfortunately, I should say before we get too far down this road, that my family split at that time and I didn't spend a great deal of time with my father.

Q: Where were you brought up?

LAHIGUERA: I was brought up in Long Island until I was 10 years old. Then I moved with my mother to Manhattan and I stayed there until I graduated from the eighth grade. I then went to a Jesuit boarding school near Williams in Western Massachusetts, Cranwell. John McLaughlin (the TV talk-show host) was one of my teachers.

Q: Well, let's talk a little bit about growing up in New York. Where were you going to school?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I went to parochial schools both in Queens and in Manhattan.

Q: How did you find the education looking back on it?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I had eight years of Dominican nuns in those days when they still had nuns and had enough of them. It was very strict. I found out what a ruler felt like on the hand and I thought it was, looking back on it, a reasonable education.

Q: Did you get any feel for New York? I mean you were there, we're talking about the forties really. Did you get out and around in New York at all or did you just go to school and home?

LAHIGUERA: Well, of course as a grammar school student I didn't venture too far. I rode around a lot on the subway. I certainly knew Manhattan, but I did travel a great deal.

Q: Were there any things that interested you particularly while you were in elementary school while the Dominican nuns were working you over for eight years?

LAHIGUERA: Well, at that time, actually my main interest was entomology. I was reading a lot about insects. Everybody thought I was going to become a biologist.

Q: Well, then, what was your mother doing at that time?

LAHIGUERA: She became a stewardess on a ship and she ended up working on the United States the first time it sailed.

Q: Oh, yes. It was a premier liner.

LAHIGUERA: Yes, and she had been on the America before. I spent a lot of time with my aunt who was her sister and her husband until I was ten. They had a bakery.

Q: Did you get involved in the baking business?

LAHIGUERA: No, I can't say that I learned how to do anything. I learned how to make boxes that you put cakes in.

Q: Because one always thinks of the terrible hours that a baker has to put in.

LAHIGUERA: Yes, you get up at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning. This was during the Second World War. I can still remember the air raid practices, turning off all the lights.

Q: Then you went to Cranwell, is that right? Cranwell is where in Massachusetts?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. In Lenox, Massachusetts.

Q: In Lenox, Massachusetts.

LAHIGUERA: In Western Massachusetts.

Q: Western Massachusetts. And you were there for four years? What year did you graduate, do you remember?

LAHIGUERA: '55.

Q: So, then '51 to '55.

LAHIGUERA: Yes.

Q: What was Cranwell like at the time?

LAHIGUERA: Well, we were a very small school. The student body principally came from New England. We had about 200 students. It was a very nice place. We also had very good discipline there.

Q: Was it a Jesuit school?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, Jesuit. Half of my teachers were Jesuits. It was well run.

Q: What sort of subjects were you interested in?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I became interested in history. I also took Latin and German. I had an Austrian Jesuit who had been expelled from China and he taught me German.

Q: How about Spanish? Were you getting any of the father tongue or not?

LAHIGUERA: No, I wasn't. I had to decide one way or another. I guess I just made the decision to take German.

Q: Did you pop over to Williams from time to time? I'm a graduate of Williams.

LAHIGUERA: I went up once to see my father. I didn't have any transportation and it was a complicated process. I had to sort of slip off the campus and catch a bus at Pittsfield to go up there.

Q: Oh, yes, well, even today if you don't have a car, you're out of luck almost.

LAHIGUERA: And, you know, no one had a car. I didn't even know how to drive a car.

Q: Did you find any elements of history, I mean I don't know if you had to be a major, but you were more towards the history side of things?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I was also very interested in physics. I had physics and chemistry, but my math grades were just mediocre. So, I had considered majoring in physics in college, but I felt that getting Bs and Cs in math, I wasn't going to be a star in any science program. I was reading different things. I had read this story, Wartime Mission in Spain, I think it was something like that. It described how the embassy operated in trying to entice the Spaniards to cooperate with us and at least stay neutral and preferably cooperate with us. I found that a very fascinating account and that was one of the first times I really started thinking about going into the Foreign Service. That one book really plotted the idea.

Q: Well, you know, at least something starts the process. Did the outside world intrude much at Cranwell; I'm talking about news and that sort of thing with much discussion about what was happening? Kids were talking about the Korean War and the Cold War was heating up and all?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, certainly there were discussions. I can remember Dien Bien Phu occurring. But we were very self-contained and there was no television, I didn't have a radio. One rarely saw a newspaper, so we principally focused on our studies.

Q: Well, then did you know where you were going after college in 1955 when you got out?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, well, I had in addition to reading this book, I found a series of books on careers and one was a book on having a career in the Foreign Service. It sounded so good I thought I would check to see if I wanted to do that. So, I looked into where one would study and it seemed logical to me to study in Washington and I discovered the Foreign Service School at Georgetown. When I think back on it I was very cheeky because it was the only college I applied to. In today's world where you apply to a half a dozen colleges. I didn't apply anywhere else, but Georgetown and I was accepted.

Q: Well, had you, you were in Georgetown from I guess '55 to?

LAHIGUERA: '59.

Q: '59.

LAHIGUERA: That's right.

Q: Does one go right into the school of Foreign Service there?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, it's a bachelor's degree in the Foreign Service. It's principally a degree, you study economics and history and government and international relations. You had to take language.

Q: What was Georgetown like when you first got there at that time?

LAHIGUERA: Well, at that point there was the Hungarian uprising.

Q: In '56, yes.

LAHIGUERA: Yes. I think people in those days were still pro-government. There was none of this cynicisms that later came up, none of the anti-U.S. government activists that later appeared on the academic scene, at least I never sensed it. We had the draft so people were mindful about probably having to go into the military. I was romantic enough to think that I had to become a marine officer.

Q: Did they have a ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Crops)?

LAHIGUERA: We did, but we had only the army and the air force which I regarded as inferior and so I ended up joining the Marines platoon leader class.

Q: When you were there, was there any particular area you were concentrating on?

LAHIGUERA: Geographically or academically?

Q: Yes.

LAHIGUERA: In the last year I took a course on Latin American economic policies. I remember our current ambassador to Estonia, Melissa Wells, was a classmate of mine in that class. She was in several classes although she graduated a year before me. Aside from that, no. I went to a lot of different things. I went to talks I remember on Algeria, the teacher was Algerian; I listened to Aba Iban come to speak on the Israeli problem. I listened to various representatives of the Arab groups speak. I really had a very general interest in political affairs.

Q: Well, was Carter Walsh still there?

LAHIGUERA: Well, he wasn't there, he wasn't teaching, he wasn't active, he was alive and he died while I was there. I attended his funeral. The rector of the school, the regent of the school, was a fellow named Father Frank Fadner who was quite a personality by himself.

Q: How Catholic was Georgetown at that time?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it wasn't and religion wasn't emphasized. If you were a Catholic, you had to take theology. The non-Catholics took a great course of political or philosophical thought. I thought that course was so good that I audited it. I went through the whole course with no credit because I was so interested, but aside from that there wasn't a great deal of emphasis on religion. We had many non-Catholics and certainly many non-Christians in the school, so it was very universal. There weren't that many Jesuit teachers.

Q: Were a good number of the students in the school for instance the Americans in there were they pointed towards the Foreign Service or the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) or other things?

LAHIGUERA: I had always assumed that was going to be the case, but incredibly I was the only graduate in my class that I know of who joined the Foreign Service. I still really don't understand that.

Q: Because now of course the Foreign Service has a multitude of means, but.

LAHIGUERA: Well, they did teach things in the school to deal with for example shipping and international transportation. We did have some people go into the shipping business. One of my colleagues and another friend of mine who is still here joined the Maritime Administration. So, there was that aspect that the school was preparation for international business as well as for government. Actually that idea had never occurred to me at the time I applied. As I say, I was very surprised that no one else in my class entered that I'm aware of.

Q: Well, did you run across any honest to God American diplomats while you were there?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. They had an FSO come down and he must have been the Algerian desk officer and give us a talk and I was very impressed. He was talking about how Algeria would inevitably become an independent state and that was just a question of working out the settlement. That was very fascinating. One of my instructors was a former USIS officer and he wasn't very good. I will not mention his name, but we didn't have a great deal of contact with the government.

Q: By '59, you were getting ready to get out, were you following through on the Marine business?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I had attended some training at Quantico. I ran into a graduate student from Swarthmore who was studying at Georgetown and he had been a naval intelligence officer. He told me that I was crazy in wanting to join the Marines; that I would end up in the infantry in the marine corps; that rather what I had to do was join naval intelligence. As a preparation for going to the State Department, mind you, this was all part of the plan. I mean I was very focused on where I wanted to end up. So, I switched from the Marine Corps to Navy OCS (Officer Candidate School). I graduated in '59 and I ended up going to Newport to OCS.

Q: You just applied for OCS? This was not part of the Georgetown program?

LAHIGUERA: Right, because Georgetown had nothing to do with the Navy or the Marine Corps.

Q: What sort of training did you get? What was your impression of the training?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was of interest. You're talking about Newport? We spent, let's see I started in February to June. I was commissioned I think on June 10th in '60. Because I was healthy, you only could join naval intelligence if you had a medical limitation.

Q: Yes, usually the eyes.

LAHIGUERA: The eyes, so because I was healthy, they made me an air intelligence officer. This was different from just being a straight O&I officer. I spent until June and learned celestial navigation and fire control and that kind of thing. I certainly wasn't ready to take command of a ship when I left, but I knew the difference between a lieutenant and a lieutenant commander.

Q: And what did they do with you then?

LAHIGUERA: I was assigned to intelligence school in Norfolk, to air intelligence school. Then I was attached to an anti-submarine squadron in Quonset Point, Rhode Island. We flew up the last straight deck carrier, the Lake Champlain.

Q: How long were you doing that?

LAHIGUERA: I did that for three years. Until June of '63 and during that time my ship picked up the first astronaut, Alan Shepard. I can remember him coming out of the sky.

Q: Well, now Lake Champlain, this was a, what was it an Essex class carrier?

LAHIGUERA: That's correct.

Q: Before we moved to the angle deck carrier?

LAHIGUERA: We were the last operating straight deck carrier. The ship is razor blades now.

Q: Did you get much involved in say anti-submarine work and all that?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I became so-called qualified as an anti-submarine officer. We went chasing around Russian submarines as best we could during the Cuban times.

Q: What was your impression of how things worked at that time? Did you have a pretty good picture of where the Soviet subs were or was it sort of hit or miss?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I always felt that I would be safer on a submarine. I can remember some exercises when we started working with nuclear submarines. It was hopeless. We were just beginning to track them when they had already sunk us. That was an experience.

Q: How about during the Cuban Missile Crisis? What were you up to?

LAHIGUERA: That was an interesting time. That was the only time that I was in uniform.

Q: That was in '62, around September or something, October of '62.

LAHIGUERA: It was the only time there was a serious possibility that I was going to see military action. I can still remember the OP order, the operations order that we received and we went out. We were instructed how to proceed and how to block ships going into Cuba and how to handle those leaving Cuba. The OP order was very specific on ships coming in. We were instructed how to approach them and signal them and tell them to turn around especially if they had missiles. I still recall reading this operations order that went through all the procedures where you give them a warning and you told them to turn around and if they didn't, you would do something else. If they didn't do what you told them, you have to radio the Pentagon to get permission to do whatever was next. I remember turning the page of the OP order and it said if they don't do all the above, you sink them. It really startled me that we had instructions in writing. We were authorized to sink them. That was the revelation, but fortunately, once we deployed they did turn around. All we did was photograph ships leaving Cuba. We had cameras. I was also the federal officer in my squad. We had cameras aboard our aircraft. We had S-2 trackers and we photographed a lot of missiles leaving.

Q: I guess many of those pictures that often did show up on the front pages of major newspapers later on.

LAHIGUERA: Only if the Pentagon released them.

Q: Well, I'm sure they did. But, was the feeling that this may be it or?

LAHIGUERA: Well, when we went to sea it had felt that way. But as soon as we got there and the ships started to turn around, then we knew it was all over. So, that was a great relief.

Q: I'm sure it was. How did you like navy life?

LAHIGUERA: I enjoyed it, but I was also looking forward to getting out. I took the Foreign Service exam while I was in the navy.

Q: Did you pass it?

LAHIGUERA: I didn't pass it the first time. Actually I took it the first time as a practice anyhow because I couldn't have gone in even had I passed it. I'm a great believer of taking exams to see what they're like. I think it helps a lot. So, I didn't pass it the first time, but I did pass it the second time in April of, let's see, '63.

Q: Do you recall the oral exam? Do you recall any of the questions?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I went in uniform to the exam. It was on April 6, '63 I believe and there were three officers who interviewed me. The chairman I believe was an economic officer and I can remember questions from both exams. The first time I passed the written and I didn't pass the oral, but the second time I passed them both. On that particular exam the chairman said he realized I wasn't a graduate of the naval academy, did I perhaps know who the first admiral in the navy was? That sort of put my back out of it because when you're in the navy, you are forever at war with the guys who graduated from the academy. So, I said, "Well, first of all let me say I feel that I am just as good as any other naval officer." I said that the panel should feel free to ask me any questions they wished on the navy. And the question was, Admiral Farragut from the Civil War. They then sort of apologized for the question, which I think, gave me a great psychological advantage. It was an interesting experience and I will certainly not forget that.

Q: Of course Farragut was a graduate, he came up the midshipman way and I think he was even in the War of 1812 wasn't he?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I believe so.

Q: Were you married at this time?

LAHIGUERA: Yes I was.

Q: Was your wife onboard as far as the Foreign Service and all that? What was her background?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. She had been born in New York, in Long Island. She had attended college in Queens, Queens College. She seemed very interested in going overseas.

Q: Did they tell you right off that you had passed the exam?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. I remember the chairman asked what I wanted to do and I said, well, I was interested in political affairs. Later on he gave me a little lecture that economics was also important and I wasn't to neglect it entirely.

Q: I got exactly the same lecture in 1955 when I had trouble with the economic side. I think this comes standard. Well, then when did you actually come into the Foreign Service?

LAHIGUERA: I came in in July. I got out of the navy in June, around June 10th and I came in in the end of July sometime.

Q: The A-100 or the basic officer's course. What was your impression of the various people there?

LAHIGUERA: Well, let me say first that when I came in, they didn't have room for me in the A-100 course. So, I was assigned to Soviet Eastern European staff in the European Bureau and worked for a fellow named Frank Siscoe, the director and I was given the responsibility for Polish exchanges. I thought this was rather incredible. I had just walked off the street and I sat behind this desk. All of a sudden I was involved in all kinds of stuff, writing letters and making phone calls and I was just barely learning the names of all the things. I can remember one thing that really struck me. Foy Kohler was our ambassador to the Soviet Union at that time and he came in and we had a big conference in one of the conference rooms in the Department. They had invited all the members of the Soviet directorate and all of our staff to this conference. We all sat around this big table and Foy Kohler sat at the head. There was a general discussion of what our relations with the Soviet Union were and the way things were going. At that, when they got done, he asked that all the officers present would please comment. We went around the table and I was just amazed. I mean I had spent three years in the navy and no admiral had ever asked my opinion on anything, much less somebody like Foy Kohler. Needless to say, I did not have anything to add to our current position on the Soviet Union. But the fact that I was asked my opinion on it made me realize that I had to start thinking about what we were doing. I've found that through the years people in the Foreign Service many times didn't care particularly about your grade, if they felt you had something interesting to say. That was very refreshing. That was a big difference between the Department of Defense and the State Department. So, anyhow I went through several months there and I ended up in the A-100 course sometime in November.

Q: Well, then you must have been able to recall how the assassination of President Kennedy hit Washington and all?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I was in the A-100 course at the time when the president was assassinated. I remember very well. I remember going to class and our moderator got up and said that they just had news that the president had been killed in Dallas. I remember the shock.

Q: Some of that spirit became sort of the arrival on the scene of the next generation that was really a World War II generation, Kennedy and government service being such a something of honor and all that. Had that permeated do you think your class?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. One big difference from today is that at least half of the Foreign Service class, at least half of the men, had been officers in the military. So, there was a great deal of difference in the attitude.

Q: How was the class? Was it many women or minorities or not?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I wouldn't say many, but I would think at least a quarter of our class were women, maybe more. The only member of our class who became ambassador was a woman, Teresa Tull. In fact, my recollection is she was the only member of the class who didn't have a college degree. We accepted people who didn't have college degrees and we still may. I hope we do.

Q: Yes, I don't think it's a requirement.

LAHIGUERA: She was obviously very intelligent. Anyone who passes the exams in those days and didn't have a college degree was pretty bright. Anyhow, I thought it was a very interesting class. I still have contacts with several other members.

Q: Were you pointed towards something at all? I mean personally pointed toward something?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I had taken German. You had to qualify in a language, so my immediate objective was to be assigned to a German speaking post so that I could get qualified in German. While I was at Georgetown I went to the University of Munich and I studied there for a semester. Then when they asked me which way I wanted to go, I said Munich. I still remember the personnel officer said, "That's not very likely. You got anything else?" I said, "Well, I'll go anywhere you want to send me. I don't mind, but I would like a German speaking post and you asked me where I wanted to go and I want to go to Munich." So, he said, "All right, if Munich is your answer then we'll write it down." I can still remember the day when they read out all the assignments and they got to my name and they said Munich. I almost fell off a chair. The personnel officer wanted to know what I wanted and so I told him. They were very gracious and gave it to me. I had a happy relationship with personnel as far as assignments are concerned ever since. I loved every assignment I had.

Q: Well, you were in Munich from '64?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I got out of the A-100 course in the end of '63. Because of my assignment unit, they assigned me German language. I went through that five months or six months. Anyhow, it was the summer time. They ended up deciding that our class would go to the passport office and issue passports for the summer. This was going to somehow save the Department money and they wouldn't have to bring in temporary people. Anyhow, so we ended up issuing passports.

Q: Where?

LAHIGUERA: I stayed here in Washington.

Q: That doesn't sound like much fun.

LAHIGUERA: At least it gave a little stability and then after that assignment I went off to Munich.

Q: Well, you were in Munich from '64 to '66?

LAHIGUERA: From '65 to '66.

Q: As consular officer, what were you doing there?

LAHIGUERA: Well, in those days we rotated which I actually thought was a very good idea. The idea was you would spend six months in each of the cones. That was the concept, but it didn't always work. They needed you most in the consular section, so I was first assigned to non-immigrant visas and issued tourist visas. Which actually in Munich is a very pleasant duty because you have enormous records and the local authorities are very cooperative and the Germans absolutely don't like to say anything improper to an official. So, when you interview them they pour their heart out generally. They are very easy compared to other cultures that I've dealt with like New Delhi. That was very nice. I spent six months as a visa officer and then I expected to go to the commercial economic section or the administrative section. They decided that I had to go to the passport section and so I spent six months there. Then I was assigned to the political section, which was great. The political officer, a fellow named Andy Stalder decided to go on home leave so I became the political officer of the post, which was nice. I listened to some of Franz Josef Strauss's very long and I must say boring speeches on agricultural policy and things like that and I attended rallies. I remember writing a report on May Day in Bavaria and I'm sure that must have put somebody to sleep. We had both the right wing nationalist parties and the pro-communist parties active. I attended meetings of both of them, rallies of both of them and their speeches, which were at least more entertaining. I can remember I used to talk to the military intelligence people at the post. They did a lot of photographing in those days. I can remember being in one pro-communist party meeting and having somebody with a camera in the crowd and focusing on me. I'm going to be some DIA and they're going to try and figure who in the world I am. Anyhow it was interesting. We had an upcoming election and I wrote a report saying that I expected the nationalist party to be seated.

Q: Particularly in Bavaria I imagine we were paying very close attention to particularly the nationalists, weren't we? This is where Hitler had started and was a theme that lasted for a long, long time. I think in news today the Germans turn right sometimes.

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Well, I had predicted that they were going to gain enough votes to be seated. I felt that their election was really as the result of a protest. Many people voted for the left or right simply because they were dissatisfied with the principal parties. I didn't think there was a serious move in that direction. When I said that to the desk they suddenly lost interest in my predictions.

Q: How did you find as a political officer there were you able to go around and talk to the people from the various parties and all that?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, all the parties. I attended as many of the functions as I could. I felt we were very warmly received by the socialists and by the Christian democrats. We had great access, the majority were extremely pro-American at the time. Although there was a vocal anti-Americanism over Vietnam and they had made me also the assistant security officer.

Q: Who was the consul general at the time?

LAHIGUERA: A fellow named Bob Keel.

Q: Was there a significant amount of students going to the United States at this time?

LAHIGUERA: In fact I had to stay on the Fulbright committee to help select students to go. USIS got me into that.

Q: You know, having gone to the University of Munich and sort of being of the age and all, so many students at the university, particularly the European ones locate in the United States, go through a Marxist stage. I mean was there a significant number who were sort of going through that phase?

LAHIGUERA: I can't say that I found that. I had a lot of German friends.

Q: What were you getting, you personally, but also other people in the embassy who were dealing with this. What was the estimate of Franz Josef Strauss there? He was a pretty dominant figure of Bavarian politics at the time? Did you feel that he was a loose canon?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I would say he probably had aspirations of becoming the prime minister. I can remember we had a lot of focus on the offset agreement. That experience led me away from Europe because I felt things moved glacially there. I didn't find it very interesting. It's hard. I mean working on this the politics of Germany are interesting, but they really don't change very much. They didn't change their relationship with us very much. We didn't have any great differences. So, I really decided that this was not the area that I wanted.

Q: You came back what, in late '66?

LAHIGUERA: As I said personnel was always very nice to me and they asked me where I wanted to go. I said, "Well, I'd like to go to the Caribbean." I was in EUR and the next thing I knew I had orders to Curacao as a consular officer. Curacao was under the European Bureau. I think that's part of it, but they said they needed me sooner than later than I was scheduled to leave, so I was cut from Munich by about four or five months.

Q: Well, you were there in '66 in Curacao?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, I believe so.

Q: You were there three years?

LAHIGUERA: No, that's another story. I went there as a consular officer and there were only three officers at the post and two American staff so, there were five of us. I enjoyed it. I could write a book about that place alone. While I was there I was still very naive about how the State Department operated. After I'd been there about six months, we received one of these worldwide telegrams looking for a volunteer for Vietnam. I wrote an airgram and said in reference to their worldwide appeal I would be interested in being considered for an assignment in Vietnam on my next tour and then plunked that thing in the mail. The next thing I know, about three weeks time, I got a cable back from the Department saying warmly we'd accept your offer, you've been transferred to Vietnam. The consul general was a very unhappy man. I'd only been there one year. He said, "you know, what did you expect?" I said my message was that I wanted to leave for there on my next tour, I wasn't asking for a direct transfer. I didn't realize how desperate they were.

Q: Well, let's talk about the time you were in Curacao. What was the political situation in Curacao at that point?

LAHIGUERA: They belonged to the Netherlands. I was actually assigned to the Netherlands Antilles. There were six islands. We got our accreditation from the queen of the Netherlands. I only saw two of the islands. We had a very large American presence on Aruba, which is to the west of Curacao. Standard Oil had a large refinery. Curacao has a large refinery as well, Shell. Shell dominated Curacao. It was a very interesting society. They had a governor and a queen who was a local person. They had their own communist run government and they were all local people. There was a very small Dutch military force. They had a destroyer, a very small navy. It was really quite minimal.

I had the impression the Dutch would have been glad if they had left the Netherlands and become independent. But they didn't want to become independent because they had a fear of Venezuela. They feared Venezuela would grab them and take them or at least take over Aruba and probably Bonaire.

We didn't have any problems at all there. Everybody went to Florida to study or go on vacation. The relationship with the consulate general was very warm. The political differences really were with the Netherlands if there were any or with the other Latin American countries. We were the good guys in Curacao. I remember proposing an idea of having joint marine naval exercise in Curacao where we'd have the marines invade Curacao and everybody thought that was a splendid idea. Then we got a cable back from the Latin American bureau saying okay, we can do that. Of course the following attachés would like to attend the exercise. They included the Venezuelan local attaché. His involvement blew the idea out of the water.

Q: Who was the consul general?

LAHIGUERA: Horace Euston was the consul general. He was a retired FBI officer. He must have had some political connection to have gotten this job. They were charming people and we got along very well with the government at the time.

Q: What about was there an independence movement there?

LAHIGUERA: Not the least. As I say, they didn't want to be independent because they felt if the Dutch left, the Venezuelans would be there. The Dutch supported the government and they gave them all kinds of study opportunities and scholarships. They had all kinds of programs to help the Curacaoans. I guess they just felt they wouldn't get such a good deal from anybody else and the Dutch really let them do what they wished aside from having them base a destroyer there which I think they eventually sent home.

Q: Was there much talk of Venezuela?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. We had a lot of boats come in from Venezuela selling fruits and vegetables. I would say the average person in Curacao spoke four languages, which I just found amazing. They had a local language and they spoke Dutch and they spoke English and they spoke Spanish. I don't know if I ever met any Curacaoan who didn't speak all four of those languages. They broadcast the television in all four. My children, my oldest one started in a Curacao school. All of the schools started in Dutch. You had Dutch the first year and you started English the second year. I think by the fourth year you were taking Spanish. If you watched their television, they'd have a program in English and the next one would be in Spanish and the next one would be in Dutch. They had Dutch news broadcast and they had English news broadcast. So, it was really very multi-language operation. Very interesting.

Q: The Caribbean tourism business is very strong today, but I was wondering whether it was then.

LAHIGUERA: In fact I would say that it was more important. We got ships in all the time.

Q: It was quite a contrast wasn't it, to have something that looked sort of European all of a sudden. Were there problems with American tourists?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I could spend the whole afternoon.

Q: Well, tell me a story or two.

LAHIGUERA: Well, the Dutch ran a state brothel. They had a lot of merchant seaman. So, they set this place up. The arrangement was that all the staff in the brothel were foreigners. They were all there temporarily. They'd come in by visa and left after just a few months. They were all very closely controlled by the Dutch medical authorities who controlled everybody's arrival and departure. No local personnel were allowed to work there only the foreigners. There were no local women engaged in prostitution. They were very severe about anyone who wanted to be an independent entrepreneur in Curacao. They really had this thing under control. We were involved because we had an arrangement with the police regarding the granting of visas to work in this place. I'd check the names with the police and the police would say yes, we gave them a visa to work there. I can also remember one American problem I had. A fellow who was a member of a very prominent family was mentally unstable and he used to come in the consulate and give us a tirade. He'd throw his passport down and he tore up his nationalization papers. He was a nationalized citizen, but he was obviously not stable. We wanted to send him back. He used to sleep on the street and we wanted to send him back to the United States for medical treatment. The police didn't want to touch him because his family was too prominent. They didn't want to force him to do anything, so I used to try to talk him into getting on an airplane. I was never successful at it.

Q: When you applied for Vietnam and Vietnam had been sort of boiling around, what was your impression from where you were about Vietnam at this time?

LAHIGUERA: Well, when I had put my name down, there was so much controversy. I had seen a lot of it in Munich including the anti-war protests. I wanted to see it for myself and to resolve whether we should be there or not. I wanted to get on the ground and see what this was all about.

Q: Good American terms of civil war was seeing the elephant. Did you get any, you got your orders to take off when, this was about when?

LAHIGUERA: I guess the end of '66.

Q: You were in Vietnam from when to when?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I went back to Washington and they put me in a training course. In fact I was in the same class with Terry McNamara.

Q: This was State Department?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. This was our operations and rural development course. It was our aid program on the ground. It was funded by USAID.

Q: So, '66 to '67 you were in training mostly?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. The training at FSI was at Arlington Towers. The atmosphere in the language school was not very cordial. In fact, it wasn't like anything I ever saw before or since. It was a very unfortunate situation. I was interested in learning Vietnamese, but many of the students assigned were first year students. They were brought in after the A-100 course. It was my impression that they all were assigned to Vietnam. A lot of these candidates had a very adversarial attitude. They didn't want to learn Vietnamese and they didn't want to go to Vietnam. The Department was going to make them by George and it was shape up or else. This was their welcoming speech. They had a woman in charge of the program who I did not admire at all. I felt there was a lot of unnecessary hostility. I was working along and I remember there was one young man studying with me, a fellow named Vespa. He had no problems learning Vietnamese and he spoke French. He had just come I think from graduate school somewhere. He had a very good education. He had just finished graduate school and didn't want to go to the language school. So, he didn't want to study Vietnamese and they were giving him all kinds of problems. So, he finally just resigned and he ended up getting a job I think in Greece with Citibank. He was perfectly willing to go. He just left because they were being so unpleasant. At the time of this program Westmoreland had started putting some light on the end of it and I had a vision that I was going to go through this year learning Vietnamese and the war was going to end and I would be the only Vietnamese speaking officer assigned to Ottawa. In between that, I thought the people managing the course were just terrible. I finally went to personnel and said, look I don't need the language qualification, as far as qualifying I had the requirements to go. I just wanted to go. I didn't ask for language training. If you don't think I have to have it, just let me know. They said, all right, we'll take care of it. The next thing I know I was assigned to leave. They terminated my training and I was about to leave when the Tet invasion occurred.

Q: January of '68 I think.

LAHIGUERA: Exactly. So, I was just waiting for the airport to reopen and as soon as it reopened, I flew in.

Q: Well, you got to, you were in Vietnam from '68, early '68 until when?

LAHIGUERA: '68 to '69. Towards the end of '69, so roughly two years.

Q: Tet was basically still going on at the time you got there, wasn't it?

LAHIGUERA: Well, obviously there was still a lot of fighting and there was a curfew in Saigon. You had to be in by 8:00.

Q: Well, you sort of met and got absorbed in the apparatus when you got to Saigon?

LAHIGUERA: I was processed in and they said, what do you want to do and where do you want to go. I said, look I'm a volunteer. Put me where you want. So, they said, okay, we'll think about it. I was still very naive about all this. They said, well, I think we're going to send you to the refugee camp. I said, that's fine. Then a fellow come in and said they needed a refugee officer up in this province, the Phuoc Long province which was in the third corps on the Cambodian border. I said, fine, I'll go. Phuoc Long province is a special place. They only took volunteers for Phuoc Long province and allowed us to inspect it first. So, I flew up to Phuoc Long province.

Actually where we were was Song Be. We had no roads in Phuoc Long, I mean none that we owned. The only way to get in and out of Phuoc Long was to fly. It had very steep decline. They had to have them shooting out of airplanes coming in. So, I remember at the little airstrip they had a big sign saying, "Song Be can be dangerous to your health." We had all kinds of black humor. There was a Lieutenant Colonel Rider who was in charge. He lived in a little trailer, which was bunkered with concrete. I found it an interesting place. I fell in love with the place and went back and told them I'd go. They assigned me to Phuoc Long and I became the refugee officer at Phuoc Long .

Q: Well, now what was sort of the CORDS (Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support) team consist of in that province?

LAHIGUERA: Well, in provinces that were militarily active, the senior province advisor was the military officer. We had military principals in the province and we had a deputy civilian under contract. A gentleman named John Joseph who was a FAA retired airborne colonel from the Second World War and he had done combat jumps in Europe. He was highly respected by the military. He was a very competent officer. I liked him a great deal. We had a civilian admin officer and a GSO. I had to worry about most of the refugee population. John Joseph did the civilian, other civilian programs. I focused on the refugees. We had about 100 Americans I'd say assigned on the team. Most of them were military.

Q: What was the military situation while you were there?

LAHIGUERA: We didn't have any large units in our province and we were defended principally by a local force, a local Vietnamese force. We even had bunkers and our advisory team on the military side made several bunkers. The normal civilians lived separately in prefabricated housing. I had a little trailer with a local hired Vietnamese guard. We were protected principally by the Vietnamese military. Our military was involved in immediate protection of the Americans. We had one reconnaissance airplane. The town of Phuoc Long had the main airfield where we got supplies in. All supplies had to be brought in by airplane and were taken out by air. We had an advisory team living in that town as well. There was a district team in each district. There were camps along the border. They led a D camp in Song Be. I got to see all of these places and worked at them all. As I said, there were a lot of refugees, mostly Montagnards. Most were from towns near a Vietnamese communist infiltration route. They had been told to move and they didn't move and the communists came and burned the towns. We tried to get big projects done and give them everything they needed. We built refugee villages. When the communists came in and drove people out, they'd be given some land and provided supplies.

Q: Well, the communists were basically forcing the resettlement as opposed to our trying to keep people together?

LAHIGUERA: Oh yes, no we didn't have any force at all. This was all triggered by their military.

Q: What were they trying to do, the communists?

LAHIGUERA: Well, they used this area as an approach towards Saigon.

Q: Were they mainly North Vietnamese as opposed to Viet Cong?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. After Tet my impression, my experience was that we always were against North Vietnam. I was in one district that was used as a processing place for bringing troops in. They shot down one of our planes when I was there. It severed an artery of the pilot. He was able to land the plane, but he died because he lost so much blood. He died before we could get him out. Then our district advisor was in a staff meeting, there were only about a half a dozen of them and they took a shell right under the table and killed them all. We had these Swiss aircraft, that's what they called them? They were able to set down on a very short runway. They were designed to fly in the Alps. We used to get them to get in and used helicopters to get out to the districts.

Q: What were you doing for the refugees?

LAHIGUERA: Mainly, just monitoring their conditions and providing what they needed, food, tin roofing. Arranging for medical visits and getting military to the refugee camps. I spent a lot of time in the camps. I brought a lot of patients from the camps to our hospital. We had a hospital manned by both Vietnamese and U.S. army doctors. I used to spend a lot of time going back and forth. I remember dramatically. There was a young boy with the bubonic plague. I just thought it was amazing that in this day and age, he had this stuff. He had a very swollen neck and under his arm. It just infected his glands. I remember talking to his mother. She didn't want to let him go to the hospital. If he didn't go, I guaranteed he would be dead in a week. The refugees had the belief if you go to the hospital you die. We got this fellow there and he was cured with penicillin. You could get the plague in the dry season before the rains came; apparently the rains killed the flu. We had to worry about it.

Q: Were you getting much on the political situation in Vietnam itself or could you find yourself living in your own little world pretty much?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, you lived in your own little world. We were surviving. We were under pretty frequent attacks. Little mortars fell regularly. There was an incident with a journalist, I think he was from New York. Anyhow, we were all in the military mess, in the military camp and mortars came in and we were just about to start dessert. We all dropped on the floor and these mortars dropped onto the compound and they were buzzing around and then it stopped. Everybody got up and brushed off the dirt and sat down and started passing the tea. This poor journalist was just shattered. He was off on the next flight out.

One other interesting thing while I was there. The senior officer, this colonel, had been wounded before I got there. Not in the same place, I forgot what location, but he had been leaning out of a bunker and a rocket came by and creased his head a little bit and he had a scar on his forehead. I went over to see him one afternoon after I was there five or six months. I parked the car and I was just about to go to his office, this was in the middle of the afternoon, and we got a shower of mortars. I was trying very hard to become part of the floor of this nearby building and my car got splattered. I had a white shirt on. When I got up, I looked like somebody who had just cleaned the chimney. The place was a mess. Our senior advisor was sitting at his desk and he had shrapnel come right through the wall. He had a package of cigars in his back pocket and they cut through the cigars and got him in the rear end so we had to move him around on a stretcher. We medevaced him out and he elected since that was the second time he was wounded, he elected not to come back. He allowed us to pack him out. We shipped his stuff to Saigon and I remember his replacement was a gentleman by the name of Lieutenant Colonel Ray Suarez, I believe from Mexico. Suarez was another volunteer who had extended his stay in Vietnam and he stayed close to a year or so. We were attacked and he was killed.

Q: What was your impression of the Vietnamese officials you saw there?

LAHIGUERA: Well, we had a colonel who was the province chief and I thought he was very good. I remember when Suarez got killed, after the day we were supposed to be overrun, he went around in his armored personnel carrier and waved at everybody just to show that they had not gotten him. I worked with the Vietnamese district officers. I found them quite confident. There was some animosities between the Vietnamese and the Montagnards. That was a problem and I'm sure it still exists even now.

Q: Oh, I think it's traditional really. It's the mountain folks and the plains folks.

LAHIGUERA: Well, it's more than that because they're ethnically completely different. The Montagnards are more closely related to Cambodians and the Vietnamese are more closely related to the Chinese.

Q: Did you find yourself ever telling the Vietnamese officials to ease up or be better dealing with the Montagnards?

LAHIGUERA: What I did have to do was make sure that they provided the Montagnard refugees what they were entitled to. That was one of the things that I was there for. I had a counterpart in the Refugee Bureau. He managed to show that he had siphoned off some supplies and I had called in the inspector general for the Vietnamese service. They did an investigation and confirmed it. He was demoted, but he was sent to Dalat, which is a resort area. That was a very Vietnamese way of handling things. I think there was this feeling that Montagnards ought to be taught in Montagnard schools in Montagnard, in their language. I always thought this was insane because if they were going to learn, if they were going to participate in the Vietnamese economy, they had to learn Vietnamese and they had to be accustomed to dealing with the Vietnamese society. So, we did build refugee schools and staffed them with Vietnamese instructors. I don't think this was completely in accord with the instructions. First of all, we couldn't get Montagnard instructors and I didn't think it was realistic.

Q: How did the writ of CORDS and the embassy play where you were? Were you getting visitors from Saigon quite often from the CORDS headquarters and then also from the embassy and the political section and all that?

LAHIGUERA: In Song Be we didn't get too many visitors. We went down to Bien Hoa, which was the III Corps headquarters periodically and did reporting, but they seemed to feel if we survived we were meeting the requirements.

Q: I take it you really had the feeling that you were at the end of beyond or something?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, it was.

Q: Was there a feeling that this was a place where you could really hang out? Why weren't you overrun? Why did it stay this sort of static position of lots of fighting around?

LAHIGUERA: Well, they attempted to overrun us. I can remember towards the end of my time there, they made a major push against us and we brought in a lot of helicopter gun ships and these fixed wing aircraft. Puff the Magic Dragon was what they were called and all these 50 caliber machine guns on the side. We also had artillery. There was an artillery base in Quang Ngai. We pounded them pretty severely. After this one assault the Montagnards reported to us that the North Vietnamese forces carried the bodies out all night. We generally knew what unit was in the area and what regiment of course, so as I said we weren't talking about the so-called VC (Viet Cong).

Q: Well, you did this for what, almost how long were you there?

LAHIGUERA: Just over 18 months.

Q: That's a long time though in a place like that?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it, yes, I guess. Well, actually I take that back. In Song Be I was there a year.

Q: Then where did you go?

LAHIGUERA: I was assigned to the first corps as a refugee advisor, a coordinator in the first quarter between Saigon and Da Nang. In fact I went up and visited Terry McNamara who was the deputy principal officer in the northern most province.

Q: Quang Tri?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Quang Tri. When I left Song Be I can recall I had brought down an officer from Quang Tri. A guy named Bob. He had been a little wild up there. I can remember telling folks that if he continues doing what he has been doing in Quang Tri down in Quang Ngai, he's not going to make it.

Q: Was this because he was going out where he shouldn't go and that sort of thing?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. They sent him down to us on a temporary basis and they wanted me to evaluate him and so I had him for a few weeks. My third boss then a colonel, and I remember after seeing this doctor for a couple of weeks, I said, "Well I've got six months left on the tour and I'm going to go out but he'll be dead before then." The colonel said to me, "Well, if we don't take him, we don't have anybody else. It's either him or nobody." I said, "Well, colonel you know that's your decision, but that's my view of it." I left and he was dead in about two months.

Q: What happened?

LAHIGUERA: He went down, he took a convoy down to a refugee area. He was in the lead jeep with a new captain who I'm sure didn't know where he was and our best Montagnard interpreter and they had an ambush set up for them. He drove right into it and he got several slugs in the chest. I had to bring in a new refugee officer, Joe Langlois who I still have contact with. It was a very eerie experience; just because his predecessor was killed didn't mean he was going to be killed.

Q: How could somebody have avoided that type of thing?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I mean he was in a very risky area. You've got to know where you could go and where you probably shouldn't go and you don't monitor on roads where there is a rice convoy. He also used to go off in cars as scouts into the high risk areas with a radio and call for artillery strikes on what he felt were communist positions. Not a part of his job. I was very sorry that he lost that poor captain - who I'm sure didn't know what was going on - and an irreplaceable Montagnard interpreter.

Q: Well, the last six months, what were you doing? Were you working out of Saigon with the first corps?

LAHIGUERA: I went up to the first corps and reported on the refugee conditions there. Remember George Moose was one of our refugee officers there? He was on his first tour? I remember meeting him there and spending the evening with him. Larry Colbert, he was in Quang Ngai. I just saw him. He's the consul general in Paris now.

Q: Fred Allner was there, too, I think.

LAHIGUERA: That name sounds very familiar. You could drive from pretty much the whole length up to Da Nang from the bottom up to Da Nang.

Q: I drove up from Da Nang about that time, '69 or '70 when I was with a British vice consul and in the helicopter to Quang Tri. How did the situation look to you, I mean we're talking about '69, wasn't it when you were there? I mean you were in Saigon. Did you find it was a different world in Saigon?

LAHIGUERA: Yes and in fact I found I was never comfortable in Saigon. I occasionally would go there. I didn't care for the Vietnamese I met there very much. I didn't care for the social events because I was always mindful that people were being killed and these people were having a pretty good time. The Vietnamese liked to speak French and they had been to Paris. I didn't know if they had many of their sons who were fighting. There was an elite class. I was sad to see that a lot of our people in Saigon hung around with that Vietnamese class. I realized you had to do that because you have to know what the power structure is thinking and where it is going. We're not missionaries. On the other hand, it was a terrible contrast.

Q: Well, of course this is what happens in a war between sort of headquarters and out in the trenches. Well, you left there in '69, say around the summer of '69 or?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. I had been inspected in Vietnam and I had fully expected to be assigned to Washington. The inspectors said well, they didn't think it was necessary that I had to go back to Washington. They asked me where I'd like to go and I said, "Well, I'd like to go someplace where I'd learn another language." Well, I ended up being assigned to the our delegation in Paris to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization). So, I went back for French language training and then I went to UNESCO.

Q: So, you were off to UNESCO after French training and this would be by this time it must be close to 1970, wasn't it?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was still '69.

Q: Still '69 and you were there in Paris with UNESCO from when to when?

LAHIGUERA: '69 to '73.

Q: '73. We'll pick it up at that point. Great.

Today is August 1, 2000. You wanted to make a few comments more about what you were actually doing rather than just the sort of dramatic dangerous side.

LAHIGUERA: One of the reasons I went to Vietnam was to resolve for myself if what we were doing was to benefit the people of Vietnam and was in the spirit of our own views of democracy and government. I was very satisfied when I was there that we were on the right side. While I was there I lived at what was the de facto capital Song Be. I visited all the district capitals. I visited all the principal villages. I ate in the villages, I shopped in the markets, I slept out in the different towns. I never felt threatened by the people. I always felt welcomed by them. I got my hair cut in the markets. I felt free to travel in the communities themselves. Now, of course, going from one area to another we had large Vietnamese forces present nearby and there was always a chance of ambush or being attacked, but I never felt threatened by the community. I never felt any hostility from the people I worked with. We worked on about 20,000 resettlements of what we called refugees, 20,000 refugees. In fact, from the legal point of view they are displaced persons because they were people displaced in their own country. I was very comfortable working with them. They had great needs and they seemed to welcome my appearance. Often when I went to the camps and returned to my office I picked up many, many people along the road, none of whom, or most of whom I didn't know. I never had a fear of strangers or anything like that. So, while some of my comments before may give the impression of being always threatened, a hostile atmosphere, in fact the people were very cordial and I think the American community was very welcomed by the indigenous people, obviously not by the North Vietnamese units.

Another point as far as what we did: my function particularly was to ensure that under the arrangements, I was being paid by USAID funds, and under this development arrangement we provided certain things to the Vietnamese government and we wanted to ensure that this was reaching the people. That was my job. When somebody was displaced and government arranged for them to have a new area to develop, they provided land. We overlooked the distribution of food to keep them sustained while they built their communities, while they built their housing. We provided, through the Vietnamese government, building materials and schools. I monitored to make sure that all this was distributed properly, people got what they were entitled to, tried to encourage medical care from our military who were very good in coming by and providing care. I could give you a whole morning of stories of medical treatment which I encountered.

Q: Well, give a little.

LAHIGUERA: We'd go down to the villages and the army doctors and medics would treat people. They had a lot of tuberculosis. They had malaria. There was even a leper colony. I can remember going to the leper colony with a doctor. We'd have to go across the Song Be River on boxes that were wired together, but they floated and they were loose and we'd hop from box to box. We got to the other side to this leper colony. There was one particular lady in a hut. She had leprosy and she had TB (Tuberculosis) and the doctor said she was obviously in terrible condition. We got permission from her husband to take her back to the hospital and I ended up with this doctor having this lady on a stretcher. We were going from box to box and I had this terrible fear that if one of us tilted she'd end up in the river. So, we got her across and we got her onto a makeshift ambulance that we had. We got her back to the hospital. I remember the next morning when we visited she had crawled out because she feared being in the hospital. It was a common problem that the local people felt that you went to the hospital to die. That's just one story.

So, I tried to ensure that they got all their entitlements. We saw at least a half a dozen refugee villages built in various stages. The communist forces did at one point come in and they burned at least three of our villages. I certainly felt that the North Vietnamese armies were actually as much against the people as against us. As far as our forces there we only had a 100 man advisory team, but we had special forces in the area. We had three or four camps. We had an ARV ranger battalion.

Q: ARV stands for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam?

LAHIGUERA: That's correct. We had special forces type people led by Green Berets that were inserted in the jungle to ambush the enemy. We also had large artillery units that fired a lot during the evening. I was always impressed by the fact that you could sleep through; at least I acquired the ability to sleep through our firings all night. When the first shell from the other side came in I was awakened instantly. How I could ever recognize the difference in sound I don't know, but I did. Anyhow, we did have sufficient forces in the area and we had people like the first air cavalry who would come in and give support when we were attacked in large numbers which did happen. So, we hung on while we were there. The civilians that were there were a good team. We worked well together. We enjoyed the people. We believed that we enjoyed being there and we enjoyed working with those people. Nobody that I can recall ever wanted to move. I eventually took an assignment as a coordinator in the first district simply to see another part of Vietnam because I had spent this whole time in the province of Phuoc Long and occasionally going to meetings in Bien Hoa. I wanted to see a little bit more of the country and really that's why I finally decided I wanted to move on. Anyhow, I think you can see the atmosphere in the community was very, very good. I got along very well with the officials. There was a district chief named Lu Yem. I think he was in Bo Duc right on the Cambodian border. He was a major and I was later to work with him when he became the province chief of Phuoc Long and then eventually the province chief of Bien Hoa. I last saw him operating a laundromat in Arlington. I think that is essentially what I wanted to say.

Q: Well, then you're with UNESCO and you're working with UNESCO from '69 to '73?

LAHIGUERA: That's correct.

Q: What did UNESCO involve and where did it sort of fall within the political spectrum of the UN?

LAHIGUERA: Well, UNESCO is the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture. My impression was that it probably drew the most liberal, left wing elements of the international community into it. I was assigned there as the political officer. We had the permanent representative who was a gentlemen by the name of Pierre Graham, an excellent Foreign Service Officer and we had a member of the UNESCO executive board who was Ambassador Katie Louchheim. My responsibilities were on the program side. I had the cultural programs, the communications programs, I had relations with non-governmental organizations. As far as contacts with other delegations I focused on the East Asian delegations, but I did have relations with all of the delegations. In those days we were very much in the Cold War so as a political officer in all the meetings we had to take into consideration unfortunately the Cold War elements. Every time we voted on a meeting we had to consider which China was going to be represented in the meeting, which Korea, which East Germany, which Cambodia. One side would attack and the other side would respond. In fact I suggested once to the Romanian delegate that we just do a prerecording and play it while we had coffee because it was something of a ritual. In the beginning of those days we still had our embassy in Taipei and we were concerned about the votes on representation with China. I had to make sure all the delegates were around and knew that we were going to have a vote on the Chinese question. I had an unfortunate task when we finally did switch sides. I was asked by my boss to go down and inform the Taiwanese ambassador. That was one of the iciest meetings I've ever experienced. My heart wasn't in it, but it was my job and I did it.

Q: Now who was the head of UNESCO at the time?

LAHIGUERA: The director general of UNESCO, the head of the secretariat was a gentleman by the name of Rene Maheu, a Frenchman. He was reasonably cooperative with the United States and with the United States interests. During my time there his term was to expire and he had been there quite some time and the question arose as to who would replace him. I can remember we discussed at the time Mr. M'Bow who came from West Africa. I believe from Senegal. I wasn't terribly enthusiastic about Mr. M'Bow. I was the only one from the delegation who was reluctant. I was supporting a gentleman by the name of Gardner from Ghana. We were pretty well agreed that it probably should be somebody from Africa. I wanted an Anglophone. We had a long dose of Francophone leadership. I just thought Mr. Gardner would be a good change. I was convinced by my boss, and we had a very free discussion about this, that this Mr. M'Bow would have a better chance of being elected. We didn't want somebody who was going to be sympathetic with the communist side. Eventually we went along with the consensus and Mr. M'Bow was elected, but didn't pan out very well. There was a lot of criticism of him during his tenure. I wasn't there and I really can't comment on it.

Q: Well, did you find that UNESCO, you mentioned, when you get into things dealing with culture and education, there very definitely is a what you call a French approach. You know, highly controlled, a great deal of emphasis on the French language often enough. Did you find this permeated UNESCO while you were there?

LAHIGUERA: They certainly encouraged things French, there was no doubt about that. One of my tasks in the communications area was monitoring the question of freedom of information recall. There was a great deal of support from the developing world, from the communist bloc and from even many of our friends in Europe for some sort of media standards which we viewed with some suspicion because it moved very much toward censorship. In that one area we had a lot of debate on adopting an international code of conduct. I've forgotten the name of it. Of course they drummed on aspects of wanting to outlaw pornography and racism. What they wanted to do was be able to have control of the other side and we were in favor of freedom of expression. On cultural things, it just amazed me all the time no matter what kind of subject you would raise, somebody would come up with a political angle to it. I found myself embroiled in cultural things. The Arabs were forever raising questions about Israeli abuse of Arab religious and cultural sites. We had these constant storms where we often found ourselves as the only supporter of the Israeli delegation. Even the Europeans backed away from some of these things. I can remember the Israelis did tend to take us for granted and I can remember one time that we abstained on a vote against them and their ambassador came in shaking his finger at our permanent delegate saying that he would report us to Jerusalem because we had voted against them. I can't remember what the particular issue was. So, we had these many political fights over cultural things and over educational things.

Q: You were in the '69 to '73, you were there during the first half of the Nixon administration. Was there an attitude at that time? Later UNESCO became sort of a focal point of sort of American frustration against international affairs, thanks to Mr. M'Bow I think, but was there much of that at this time?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, while I was there we withdrew from the ILO (International Labour Organization). That had been triggered as I recall it by the fact that the ILO membership had decided to elect a Soviet deputy director and that so incensed our labor leadership that they advocated our withdrawal and we did in fact withdraw. But, I used that occasion to emphasize to many of the members of the secretariat of UNESCO and some of the other delegations that this could happen in UNESCO as well, that they could not continue to ignore our views on things if they wanted us to stay. I can remember in particular talking with the Japanese on this subject. They were very surprised when I expressed the view that someday we would leave if things continued on what I regarded as somewhat of a downhill slope. We also had complaints about getting greater American participation in the secretariat. We had a great deal of trouble getting Americans accepted in the secretariat. I had a perhaps exaggerated view of the secretariat's membership. I used to describe them as European intellectuals, the Soviet KGB members and American Quakers. Oh, and Third World son-in-laws of government officials. We would go to these meetings and listen to a tirade against the rich nations by the developing world. Then I'd get in my old broken down 404 Chevy and drive off and the African delegations would all get in their shiny new Mercedes chauffeur driven and leave the meeting. This was always a bizarre experience.

Q: Well, it would strike me that UNESCO would be a place to put your, you mentioned European intellectuals in a place that would bury them, you know, get them out of everybody's hair. The intellectual climate at that time was sort of socialist circles, which was sort of the stomping ground of the intellectuals, was anti-American. I would think this would be a good place to sort of beat up on us.

LAHIGUERA: Yes, well they certainly took every occasion. I was used to wearing flak jackets fortunately, and I needed them in this place. I can recall talking about putting people there to get them out of the way. We had an executive board member from the Ivory Coast named Dodier. The Ivory Coast is generally very sympathetic. They had warm relations with the United States at that time, but Mr. Dodier invariably voted with the communist bloc. We complained back to Washington who in turn complained to Abidjan, but we never could do anything about Mr. Dodier. So, you had this phenomenon that even representatives of countries that were usually friendly with the United States sometimes turned against us.

Let me mention an experience I had in the communications sector. UNESCO put out a magazine. They did a study on the arms race and arms reduction and sales in the world. I was responsible for the media and the magazine department. I discovered just by chance, they would put out this magazine in Spanish, English, French and Russian. I think eventually it may have come out in Arabic. I don't speak Russian. But I happened to notice that the Russian articles looked shorter. We checked it out. This magazine was published in the Soviet Union and the Russians extracted all the statements in the article describing any Eastern Bloc weapons production or sales. The article made it appear like we, the West, were the only manufacturers of arms and the only seller of arms in the world. So, we had a big row over that in the UNESCO magazine.

Q: What was American interest in UNESCO?

LAHIGUERA: Well, we did want to participate in preserving important cultural places, in fostering education especially in the developing world and fostering exchanges. In having exchanges in science and in developing science especially in the developing world. So, we were very sympathetic to this and we contributed. We were the principal donors at UNESCO. We paid the largest fee and we did support many projects. We were very much involved in Egypt with the preservation of Abu Simbel. The Nubian tombs if I recall correctly. I remember while I was there the question of the preservation and restoration of Borobudur in Indonesia came up and we were very interested in that. In Peru there was Machu Picchu. We were interested in supporting them. So, I felt there were many constructive things that could be done and we were perfectly happy to support, but invariably the other side would bring up political issues. We did not instigate political fights in this place. We spent much of our time defending.

Q: Did you get any feel from Washington I mean how to conduct these fights or did they say okay, pick a fight on this or do this or that or was this all sort of reflexive?

LAHIGUERA: Well, our positions were generally just an echo of whatever we were saying in the general assembly in New York or the security council. So, it was pretty impressive. There were some also practical things. We were very supportive of UNESCO copyright works. Of course our publishers were interested in copyright and there's a universal copyright convention with UNESCO. I helped to introduce a proposal for the protection of phonograms of recordings. UNESCO also got involved with the convention of universal property. This was another practical matter that we were involved with.

Q: What was your impression of the Third World, particularly talking about Africa and some of these poorer countries?

LAHIGUERA: The main issue that the African delegations were always bringing up was the question of South Africa. They would always bang the drum on apartheid. We had a big investigation of non-governmental organizations. There were several hundred non-governmental organizations that were associated with UNESCO. There was an investigation of all these organizations. There was pressure brought to bear on them to either expel their South African members or to be expelled out of UNESCO. I thought they dedicated themselves to a lot of this kind of thing and there was not a lot of energy coming out of the developing world for development programs. There wasn't any great deal of interest. We felt disappointed. There were field programs. The secretariat proposed them and they were in the budget. But UNESCO didn't have a lot of funds for field projects. The UNDP, the UN development program people, would put up funding for these budget items and we'd provide experts. We supported these kinds of things and I think we would have certainly preferred that kind of positive approach rather than beating political drums all the time.

Q: What was your impression of the administrative apparatus of UNESCO because this is something that you often see that the UN has been under the power of Americans for a long time and what was your impression?

LAHIGUERA: Well, there was obviously a lot of politics involved. All the delegations were pushing for representation in the secretariat for various reasons. I must say that we wanted to have Americans in to be able to influence the development of democracy and freedom of speech. But we also emphasized having really qualified experts in the fields of science and communication. In the Third World there was a lot of pushing to get people's relatives in. That was unfortunate. I realize there's a certain amount of practical politics the director general had to engage in. He would give out jobs like any politician and in exchange for that he got support of his budget and his programs. So, there was that element. I suppose that element is present in the relationship of the governors in our States with the President. You had to accept that. There was also a problem with the Soviets using these UN positions for inserting KGB officers. We knew there were KGB officers in UNESCO.

Q: What would a KGB officer be doing I mean was this just a place to hang his hat while he went off and did other things? Was he messing around in UNESCO?

LAHIGUERA: Well, yes, but I'm sure the objective was not with the secretariat. They would just be using that as a base. The irony of it is we would participate in their pay. My understanding is that if a KGB officer got assigned to UNESCO he had to live off UNESCO pay. He didn't get paid by the KGB. So, we were funding their espionage operations. In fact while I was there the Soviets sent as their permanent delegate a very senior KGB officer who had been PNGed out of Canada for operating a spy ring. Of course, that's in the Soviet delegation and not in the secretariat. He was well known for running his operation and collecting a ton of secrets from the United States using people in Canada. When the Canadians caught up with him, they threw him out. The Soviets made him the head of the UNESCO delegation. That gives you something of the flavor. But we had very good cooperation with the Soviets in areas where we could cooperate. We spoke to each other regularly. We had a very professional, cordial even at times I would say personally friendly relationship. This was surprising. When I arrived at UNESCO the U.S. permanent delegate had a reception for me in the first week to introduce me to people in the other delegations. The head Soviet delegate left his own reception which he was giving the same night just to call on our party and to introduce himself to me. So, we did have some common concerns. The Eastern Bloc did oppose the expansion of the UNESCO budget all the time. So there was a very strange phenomenon that on budget issues affecting developed countries, the Eastern Bloc would be voting on one side and the developing world, Africa and South Asia would be voting on the other. I would often discuss with the Russians what we would do about particular budget proposals. We also from time to time would tell the Russians that we were going to blast them on something. I can remember the Czech who sat next to me in one of the meetings. He would send me messages that this speaker talks more than my mother-in-law and things like that. But he and I would always vote against on opposite sides. We certainly exchanged lots of stories.

Q: Were there any sort of major issues or real major clashes, did Zionism or racism, was that an issue in UNESCO or did that come up elsewhere?

LAHIGUERA: That was perhaps one of our most difficult issues. There were always initiatives of one kind or another attacking the Israelis in just about every program, in trying to exclude the Israelis, in trying to put paragraphs in various resolutions condemning Israel. While I was there we also normalized our relations with Egypt. That was interesting. We started having our first meetings with the Egyptians, but even so we had a lot of difficulty, probably more over Israel than anything else that I can think of.

Q: Did Vietnam rear its head later there I mean in the issues?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, but not as a major issue. The Eastern Bloc didn't really push Vietnam. They didn't waste a lot of time. The issues that were contentious were raised by the developing world, by the Arabs over Israel, and by the Africans over South Africa. They wanted to exclude South Africa from everything. It wouldn't necessarily be in everyone's interest to exclude them from things like copyright agreements. That would just give them free rein to pirate everybody else's stuff.

Q: How do countries like Taiwan and Thailand respond to copyright moves since these are the prime sources of pirated books and records and all that?

LAHIGUERA: I don't recall it being a problem with Thailand. I think Thailand probably gave lip service to copyright support. They might not have enforced it at home. When we were forming this copyright convention I very much wanted Taiwan to be a member. This was not acceptable to the Beijing government when they came in. I don't know if this would have played much of a role anyhow. I think Taipei's view on copyright was that this stuff was only for home consumption and for students. They had some sort of formula that wasn't really realistic. In reality it didn't work out very well.

Q: How was the social life in Paris at that time?

LAHIGUERA: Oh, you had an endless number of events. I can remember going to dinner and three cocktail parties in the same evening. I really got tired of it. Towards the end of my tour I just tried to not go unless I really had to see somebody or accomplish something. Cocktail parties are a great way of lobbying for something. If I had something on the agenda I'd go to a cocktail party and push for a vote or participation or something to get people to support our side on something. I was very interested in doing that. But if it was just another cocktail party and there wasn't any practical objective, I tended in the last year to shy away from them. I'd just had too many. In fact, you'll see I eventually volunteered to return to Vietnam because I felt that this whole thing was getting boring.

Q: Were you picking up anything about the peace talks there in Paris?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, one of my neighbors, Jim Rosenthal, was a member of the delegation at the peace talks and there were other people I did meet with. We did social things together. I did speak a lot with the Vietnamese delegation in UNESCO. They were a smaller community, so they were pretty close to what was happening in Paris. So, I did from time to time have some view of what was developing.

Q: What was the impression you were getting from the Vietnamese? Was this a sellout?

LAHIGUERA: I don't recall any kind of negative views. I think the Vietnamese delegation was very appreciative of our support for them. I personally was very interested in them and I never got any critical comments. I must say the Vietnamese that were sent there were very articulate, the South Vietnamese were very intelligent officers. When the Vietnamese question did come up, they were very good at addressing it and very capable. This contrast with the Koreans. When the Koreans got criticized, they would take it as a frontal assault. They'd go into a counter diatribe. The Vietnamese were much more sophisticated. They would respond in a very evenhanded intellectual manner and I was very impressed by this.

Q: Then you're saying towards the end of this, by '73 it's getting a little bit boring? So, what did you do?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Well, at that time when we signed the agreement, the peace accords, they were looking for officers to monitor the transition. I happened to talk to personnel on the phone and said that I wasn't going to volunteer because that would cause some problems at home and in the delegation perhaps, but if I were drafted I wouldn't oppose going. So, not surprisingly, we got a telegram asking that I be transferred back to Vietnam.

Q: I have one question before we leave UNESCO. Were you there during the arrival of the Mainland China delegation?

LAHIGUERA: Yes.

Q: How did that impact on UNESCO? Did it have much?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was certainly a major social and political event. I don't think it had a great deal of impact on the programs of UNESCO at the time. The budget chief of the UNESCO secretariat was Chinese. He suddenly had a PRC task force and he came to me and said, "You know, I wish to be invited to the PRC cocktail parties if that could be arranged." I declined the offer. They were very active in coming around and meeting everyone. I remember the director general made a trip to China. There was a lot of fanfare. There was a lot of discussion about the back dues owed by China and how that was going to be resolved. I think we forgave their debt.

Q: Were you there when M'Bow took over, what was his impression of his style?

LAHIGUERA: He took over just before I left and I really didn't get an opportunity to make a fair assessment. He was a very friendly, outgoing kind of man. He reminded me more of a French politician than anything else. The Africans in fact, one of my African friends told me that he thought his father was really a Frenchman and not an African. I don't know if that was just a story to spread about enemies or whether there was any truth to it.

Q: Okay, back to Vietnam. You went where and you were there for how long?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Well, I returned in the summer of '73. I was initially assigned on temporary duty for six months with the task of monitoring the peace accords. I was assigned back to the third corps. I asked to be assigned back to the third corps because I knew that area and I'd wanted to see how things had gone since my departure and that's where most of my Vietnamese contacts were. Political officers don't have friends, they have contacts. Anyhow, they were very good about assigning me there. CORDS, the development program had been abolished and had been replaced by a consulate general, four consulates general and I was assigned to a consulate general in Bien Hoa.

Q: Who was the consul general there?

LAHIGUERA: Walt Crenshaw. He was a labor specialist. He was there I guess for about six months. My TDY more or less coincided with that period. Just an amusing point: when I arrived at the Bien Hoa airport, they forgot to send somebody to get me. So, I had to hitchhike. There was no transportation from the airport in any commercial vehicle, so I had to hitchhike to the embassy. I got a ride by some army chaplain who happened to be traveling by. When I got to the embassy they were very red-faced. There was an administrative officer by the name of Bob McCallum who had been assigned to take care of me. Mr. McCallum had the misfortune of then being assigned to me later on and I have never let him forget that.

Q: Well, then you were in Vietnam in Bien Hoa for half of '73 to when?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, well, then after my TDY assignment, they made me political officer in effect the deputy consul general.

Q: In Bien Hoa?

LAHIGUERA: In Bien Hoa. So, I went on home leave because I hadn't taken home leave yet. Then when I came back I came back as a permanent officer.

Q: So you were in Bien Hoa from '73 to when?

LAHIGUERA: To the end.

Q: To '75?

LAHIGUERA: To '75. I left off the roof of the embassy the evening of April 29th.

Q: Well, when you got there what was the situation in the third corps?

LAHIGUERA: There was sporadic fighting still in almost all the provinces. We had skirmishes. My principal job was preparing a daily situation summary that we sent in as did all the consulates general saying what had happened in the last 24 hours. We sent this in everyday. The first task I had in the morning to put this thing together. I was just one of the five persons who did this. We went out to the different provinces. In the third corps there were about 10 or 12 provinces. We had AID officers. We had a presence in every province. So, we would talk to them on the radio or on the telephone if there was such a thing. We then would put together where the attacks were through this day, how many hand grenades were thrown and how many casualties and just monitoring the behavior. We tracked the continued violations by the communist forces of the peace agreement. That's what we did for six months. I traveled all over. I saw all the provinces. I saw old friends and majors who had become colonels and that kind of thing.

Q: Was there a great degree of cynicism among you all or during the monitoring of this?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, well it was very clear that the communist had no intention whatsoever of maintaining any kind of cease-fire. So, we tried to support the local people, the local forces and hoped that they were able to consolidate their position. We didn't have any military of course. Our teams were changed. We couldn't rely on any American forces. The military presence was just the defense attaché's office, which was engaged principally in Saigon in logistics support. But each consulate general had a defense attaché's office. They had hired contractors to run their offices and these were military intelligence collection operations. I personally felt they were somewhat amateurish. We also had the CIA present and they had about four or five officers in Bien Hoa. They had what was called a base chief at the consulate general. There was a gentleman by the name of Orrin DeForest who was the CIA operative there who has written a book called Slow Burn so I'm not saying anything that isn't already published. We also had another CIA officer who wrote critical articles for the Post. So all that was far more documented than what I am going to describe.

Q: Well, what was the Republic of Vietnam, South Vietnamese government. How were they responding to these attacks?

LAHIGUERA: They would try to consolidate their position. They would try to build up their strength and the training of their forces. They would try to protect the communities. There wasn't any major offensive of any kind, it was trying to consolidate and improve what you had. I thought they had for the most part very good officers. I met all the province chiefs in the third corps. They had meetings every Monday with the commanding general of the third corps and his staff. He had two deputies, two brigadiers I guess. They were very professional. I was very impressed by the quality of the officers that they had.

Q: Were we making any attempt to stop the South Vietnamese to responding to attacks by the North Vietnamese?

LAHIGUERA: Well, certainly if the North Vietnamese initiated any actions in the third corps the southern forces were free to get rid of them. They weren't supposed to be there. I can't speak about anything outside the third corps.

Q: Well, what was happening in Phuoc Long?

LAHIGUERA: Phuoc Long. My friend, the district chief, Major Yen, had become the province chief. He was then a colonel. Unfortunately one still had to fly to Phuoc Long. The road was still very dangerous to drive though I understood they did start some sort of bus operation. I did go up there. I used to stay there overnight. I loved the place. I didn't want to convey the impression before that it was a place where I didn't want to be in. It was beautiful. The country itself was beautiful. Southeast Asia in general is more beautiful in the countryside than it is in the cities. Phuoc Long really was a collection of refugee villages. The Montagnards grew highland rice and they lived on it. There wasn't a great deal of industry. They cut bamboo shoots into other things, but it wasn't rattan. They didn't have a lot of things. We had helped build a Montagnard training center, sort of an orphanage. I used to go up and bring them powdered milk for baby formula. There were some nuns up there that helped train Montagnards to do things, teach them handiwork and sewing and that kind of stuff. So, Phuoc Long was at that time when I returned in '73 was reasonably stable and seemed to be getting along without the presence of the American military. We hadn't lost any of the district capitals and I felt very secure in Song Be itself.

Q: Well, now I assume one of your jobs in the military, I mean this whole intelligence apparatus sounds like they, everybody must have been almost tripping over each other on this, but one of the things you'd be doing would be monitoring the spirit of the ARV. How is the, what was your impression when you got down to the change of the South Vietnamese army?

LAHIGUERA: As far as tripping over each other, we had lots of jurisdictional problems with the CIA and the defense attaché's people. But, as far as the ARV was concerned, well we had regular forces. We had regional forces, RF they were called. PF popular forces something like a militia. Initially when I was there the morale was pretty good. They had a lot of support logistically. There was some optimism, but there was certainly an awareness that support for the war was eroding in the United States. That was a concern by everybody including the ambassador. Our ambassador was Graham Martin at the time. I must say that the entire time I was in Bien Hoa in the third corps, I'm not aware that the ambassador ever entered our consular district. His wife came for lunch once, but he never came. We had a very fine leadership in the third corps on the Vietnamese side. We had three major divisions in the northeast we had the 18th division, which was ably commanded. He was an extraordinary officer, very impressive. He used to entertain his troops, he'd play the electric guitar and sing rock and roll. Oh, he could do everything. He was a very dynamic, charismatic figure and proved to be so until the very end. He was in the area of Xuan Loc, which is route one going northeast, and then directly north of us we had another division. I think it was the seventh. That was a difficult area. Loc Binh was there on route 13. That command seemed to be well run. Then we had another division, the 25th division, on route one going toward Cambodia. The 25th division commander, General Ba, who was one of the biggest Vietnamese I ever saw. He was certainly over six feet and also a very inspiring guy. I think they all had a very positive attitude.

One of the cynical observations I had heard while I was there was that well you know these generals who run Saigon have to be selected for political loyalty rather than for their competence as commanding generals. I certainly didn't find that to be the case. They may well have been loyal to President Thieu, but they were certainly competent commanders. My impression was that they were highly respected by their fellow officers, by their staff, and by the province chiefs who were all military officers. So, I thought we had a very good team and I had a very good relationship with them.

Q: How did things start to go downhill? I mean what were you seeing when you talk about that?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I think as things progressed there was an erosion of our support. This led to questioning about how long we were going to give them stuff and how much we would give them, arguments over the budget and all this kind of thing. It projected the idea that we wanted to get out and then we had the unfortunate Watergate business, which I think really hurt us. This distracted the nation. I think it was a big problem for Vietnam. There was corruption in the military. My friend, Colonel Yen used to tell me about this. He eventually became province chief of Bien Hoa so I saw him quite a bit since we lived in the same town. He would tell me about the problems with what we called ghost soldiers and flower soldiers and units. In these units if a man was dead or gone that they continued to collect his pay and rations and not replace him. Flower soldiers were enlisted and were actually members of a unit, but were allowed to go home. They collected their pay and rations as well. Colonel Yen used to tell me about surprise inspections on weekends. How in the boondocks they would muster and count everybody and call to account why people were missing. He wanted to see the paperwork. So, undoubtedly there were problems and everyone admitted that, but certainly not any worse than things I've seen in other parts of the world including the United States. I felt that the Vietnamese forces had competence as long they felt they could count on our support. Over the two years I was there they started to doubt whether they could rely on us anymore.

Q: What were developments that you were seeing towards the end in '75? I mean were you seeing, was there a steady decline or was it rather fast?

LAHIGUERA: The skirmishes, the incursions increased. Particularly the North Vietnamese came in the area around route 13 to the north of Saigon and there was quite a bit of fighting there. The North Vietnamese must have taken a lot of casualties there, but they hung on and they kept some enclaves. The real test was ironically over my old province Phuoc Long. In January of '75 they mounted a major operation against Phuoc Long.

Six months into my job Walter Shaw left and Richard Peters who had been the political military chief in Saigon became the consul general. I was in effect his deputy. He was on leave at this point. I can recall there was a lot of pressure on Phuoc Long. I can remember going to the weekly meeting of the full commander and I knew we were in trouble when he felt like he was being overwhelmed in Song Be. He turned to me and said, "What should we do?" I had this terrible feeling that if he was asking me what to do then we didn't have a very good chance. I felt and I wrote that I felt that this was a test. They were going to take Phuoc Long and if they could get away with that and if there would be no American reaction that they knew they could do what they wished. In fact that's what happened. In fact, after the war, the general who commanded the invasion wrote an article in the Vietnamese press saying that that was the case. So, I felt quite vindicated on that. Song Be was the first capital to fall and they were able to take it. After that we were very concerned and then the activities started in the second corps which really caused the unraveling of everything.

Q: This is in the highlands up around Pleiku?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. We, as far as I understand, we didn't understand that they were going to attack. They moved some divisions and we were tracking them with signal intelligence according to what's been published. They were smart enough to know that we were doing that and so they didn't move their radios, they just moved their army. We had human intelligence saying there was going to be an attack, which we ignored and the signal intelligence showed that they hadn't moved. They attacked. The roads became flooded with refugees fleeing and the whole second corps caved in.

Q: When this was happening, what were you all doing?

LAHIGUERA: Well, we were just monitoring events in our own area. We were very concerned about any assaults that might take place. We were certainly looking at our evacuation plans and we weren't very optimistic about it. After Song Be fell I thought we were going to lose.

I remember General Weyand and some fact finding group came in. Ken Quinn, who was later our ambassador to Cambodia, was with them. I told them that I thought we would collapse by August. I was wrong, I didn't realize how much of a botch they would make out of the first corps. Things were really very bad there. We had troops moving both up and down the road at the same time. It was just a terrible mess. When the first corps fell we managed to evacuate the marines. The marines were evacuated and the families were left under the communists, which was a terrible situation. I was very concerned because they brought those marines into our corps and they were placed under the 18th division under General Dao and I didn't regard them as very reliable. Da Nang falling was a big shock for us. We had scenes of people desperate to get out of Da Nang and people forcing their way onto aircraft or helicopters at gunpoint and fleeing by sea. There was a lot of violence. We saw that and that impacted on our evacuation plan. We were very concerned that if we had to evacuate the Bien Hoa area we would have encountered the same kind of problems where people, armed units would try to take over the means of transportation. As a matter of fact that never happened. What we didn't understand, was that in Da Nang people were fleeing from the first corps to try to get down to Saigon and what was left of Vietnam. Most of the people in Vietnam when the end came, weren't that interested in leaving.

We had these evacuation planning sessions called by the security officer, a gentleman named Mark Garrett who was really a fine officer, a very capable guy and the backbone to the whole security business. I must say he kept his focus while everybody else and many other people were running around in circles. We discussed these problems. We were very concerned if we started initiating an evacuation that the army units could turn on us. There was this feeling that we might be in the ironic position of having to rely on communist troops to protect us against our former allies. Da Nang inspired this kind of thinking. We were particularly concerned about this marine regiment that was under the 18th, that was very close to the consulate general in Bien Hoa. When things went downhill, the first corps had to really decide about what we were going to do. The ambassador was just dead-set against any discussion publicly or any indication that we might leave.

Q: Was the attitude of the ambassador pretty well known? Was it talked about that he was out of touch?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I wouldn't use the word out of touch. My impression was that the attitude of the ambassador was that he wanted to hang on, that he didn't want to cause panic. I don't know if he imagined that we were going to have some sort of a commendation or that he was going to get the government, the American government, to finally support him. I think he was unrealistic. I think it was a hopeless case. I thought they had passed that stage. There just didn't seem to be any reason to believe that there would be much forthcoming from the United States. I think a feeling developed among the South Vietnamese forces that they didn't want to be the last soldier to die in a hopeless war. Once you get that feeling, it's very serious. The communist forces started coming down out of route 20, down from the Xuan Loc area and Major General Le Minh Dao was there to meet them. He was courageous. He decimated many of their people at the cost of at least a third of the division. He held for a long time. All of these divisions, all the generals had helicopters.

The evacuation finally took place on the 28th or 29th of April. They could have easily have gone out to the Blue Ridge or to any of the ships there at sea. None of them did. They all stayed. So much for the feeling that they weren't going to fight. The three army divisions fought. General Dao and General Ba were captured and the division commander of the staff swore that he would fight to the last minute. They didn't surrender. They were captured. I saw an article written by Dao later in the communist press, which were very cleverly written saying how he was disappointed at the United States. I said to myself, I'm sure you would have appreciated the return of the U.S. army. Nothing he said changed my view of him. I had met him several months before the end. He had a very bad eye problem which was threatening his sight. I think he had a detached retina. Anyhow we had him looked at and it was agreed that he could be evacuated to Hawaii for medical treatment. But when things deteriorated he gave up leaving and wanted to fight with his division. So he was captured. I don't know if he is still alive today, but he could have spent all that time in Hawaii if he chose to. [ed note. Le Minh Dao spent 17 years in a re-education camp. After his release, he received political asylum in the United States.] So, obviously these people, the South Vietnamese forces that did most of the dying in the war were in the end really quite courageous. They never were given the credit that they deserved.

Let me cite Frank Snepp's book, *A Decent Interval*. There are all kinds of imaginings in his account of these chaotic events. He has the details wrong. Everything that he said about the third corps was wrong. He claimed that when we left Bien Hoa that the South Vietnamese army fired on us, which was absolutely untrue. I was there and it never happened. He claimed that we had asked for helicopter gunships, hundreds. We never did such a thing. We never even considered such a thing. I was concerned that if we withdrew from Bien Hoa that they may have indeed fired on us if we had asked for such support. In fact they never did and we never asked them for support. When it looked bad the embassy arranged that we had these landing crafts sent to Bien Hoa up the Dong Nai River.

Snepp, in his book, described that the CIA was somehow involved in arranging for these landing crafts and that's completely untrue. I was personally responsible for them. I arranged for the landing craft to be anchored at a naval station on the Dong Nai River. I told that to the Vietnamese naval commander there. In fact I met him in the refugee camp later and he reminded me how cooperative he had been with us on the barge issue. We kept these barges and they would have certainly been enough to take our staff and our dependents including the Vietnamese. We had ten of them and they were huge. Anyhow, eventually we were instructed by Saigon to release the barges and that if we were going to have an evacuation that we would go by air. At this stage the 18th corps was still stopping the advance of the main enemy force. The forces were coming down from the northeast. Every time the road was closed, the 25th division under General Ba reopened it which I thought was amazing. I was impressed by this tremendously. We had a break in coordination. Typically we had a lot of AID officers under the consulate general. The AID director in Saigon started giving instructions to our AID people. So we had our AID officers being told at one stage that they were going to be taken out by boat and then I was given orders to move the staff to Saigon. I sent word to them and said, no, that's the wrong place. We'd move to a building called USAID 2 and we'll meet there and we will arrange for an air evacuation. Let me back track. The moment all of this was happening, DAO, the defense attaché's office, was Homer Smith who was in Saigon. He was the senior military officer there. They quietly closed and they withdrew from the provinces. What we didn't know, they never told us. I thought they were all going into Saigon. We arranged unilaterally to have aircraft take the defense attaché's back, including the Vietnamese and their dependents, to the Philippines. We did this without the ambassador's authorization or without the permission of the Philippine government or as far as I know without the permission of the Defense Department. What they did was they would draw out their staff piecemeal. They had all of these big containers from the commissary in Saigon. Our political staff people loaded the people into these containers. Then they put the containers on a truck and they shut them and put them in an Air Force cargo plane. They got most of their staff out that way without anybody including the ambassador knowing about it. I understand finally some Vietnamese secretary managed to get to a phone and called her mother somehow. She got through to her mother and said, "Guess what? We're now in the Philippines and all you have to do is go down to the commissary and get yourself in a container." Anyhow, the word spread quickly, that all these Vietnamese were in the Philippines. I understand that the ambassador was quite upset. I don't have any personal witness to that but Homer Smith was fired after that. We had to explain to the Philippine government how we had brought many thousands of Vietnamese into the Philippines without the agreement of the Philippine government. That was an event. Anyhow in the meantime I was very concerned about getting the American community out. Then our staff which had worked for us for many years and their dependents.

Q: You're talking about Vietnamese staff?

LAHIGUERA: The Vietnamese staff. As regards the American community, I'd had a consular officer go around to all the American civilians we knew were there and notified them to please leave. The Americans had no problem leaving if they wished. We were running flights out of Bien Hoa and they could go with their dependents. We arranged for passports and visas for dependents, wives and children of the Americans. In the third corps absolutely anybody who stayed in the third corps after the first of April was there because they wanted to be there regardless of what they said after. We had one fellow who was working in a Vietnamese mental hospital and he elected to stay and the Vietnamese eventually threw him out. Then we had some contractors who just couldn't give up the good life. The contractors maintained aircraft and that kind of thing. We did ship home a few wives and children who were basically Vietnamese. Sometimes the Americans were already gone, but we had the weddings recorded in the consular section and we had documented the children. On a couple of occasions the wives and children went to the States to meet the husband and his American wife and children, but that wasn't my problem. That happened, too. So, on the evacuation front, the Americans weren't a major problem. But what was a problem was what we were going to do about the Vietnamese staff and their families. The ambassador seemed very, very hesitant to make a decision and then he was obsessed with this idea of peace. I was very upset about this whole issue. Finally we were given permission to start moving the Vietnamese staff. We all met in this building in Saigon. We were told to pass the word to the staff in Bien Hoa, both provinces came down. They were in Bien Hoa and they all moved to Saigon.

Q: How did you go, by helicopter?

LAHIGUERA: No. When we left Bien Hoa we drove in a convoy, but the Vietnamese made it whatever way they could into Saigon because they were coming from Phuoc Long. The staff that had been in Phuoc Long were already there in Bien Hoa from the various provinces around Saigon. There was a coordinating group there. A USAID officer named Anderson was given the job of coordinating the evacuation of the Vietnamese staff. Each one of us represented our corps. We'd get space, each corps was given so much space and then they were asked to allot their space to designate who was going to be on that aircraft. I called the Vietnamese staff of the first corps together and I told them that I was going to evacuate people based on who had been in the most dangerous places and who politically were the most liable to be dealt with harshly by the communists. I asked if anybody had any objections or any other ideas. They all seemed to accept my approach. Our policy was that staff members and their families could go and children under the age of 18. You couldn't take out boys of military age. That was the rule. You could take out their mothers and fathers. So, we started moving them and taking them out to the airport. We had to load them aboard. I had a lot of difficulty at one point. My admin officer fled. He was an American. He got on the airplane without telling me. From what I understand he got his wife on the airplane and she wouldn't leave without him, so he felt he had to go. I didn't have his records. I didn't know the pay situation and I didn't even know whether he was dead or alive. He could have been captured. So I was worried about this. He certainly didn't help any. He got out. The CIA base chief went as well and he left his staff hanging in the forest. His associates did very well and they stayed in Bien Hoa. I understand his excuse was that he was afraid that his wife would have a nervous breakdown. She was in Bangkok, so he had to leave. He was later made the head of some important industry somewhere.

It was interesting to see how people behave in this situation. Anyhow, back in USAID 2, we were trying to divvy up the evacuees. Things came to a sudden stop. I had all my guards show up. We had about 100 guards and they were armed with clubs. These fellows didn't want us to leave. They wanted to get paid. The administrative officer took care of all this. We had bags of piasters. I'd been given a suitcase full of piasters when we rode on buses and when we came to roadblocks we had these piasters to give to police at the roadblocks so they wouldn't harass us and we'd get to go through. So, a fellow representing the first corps, a fellow called Paul Dailey, tried to figure out how much he thought the guards were getting. They had two months back pay. We came up with a number and I had all the guards line up. We had a big list made out with all the names on it and each man marched up. We gave the first two or three thousands of piasters and they all smiled. So, we knew that the amount was okay, that we were obviously overpaying them and so we managed to pay off all these guards with the bribe money and get them out of our way. Then we could go back to arranging the evacuation. One lesson I learned from the first flight: we were allotted seats and I was given something like 11 seats for one family. The family didn't show up. What happened was the grandmother decided she couldn't leave without her sister and she didn't want to leave without her mother, whatever. So, one wouldn't go and then everyone else wouldn't go and then nobody went. They all just stayed behind. So, I developed a system of backups where we would either say okay, you are going to meet at a certain place and each person was told who was going to be there and from that location you would be loaded on a bus and taken to the airport. Then we had x number of backups. The backups had to understand that they would only get a seat if somebody else didn't show up. That system actually worked out very well and so I didn't lose anymore seats. Thank God. We were able to ship out a fair number of the staff and their families. I only had, I suppose, about 60 people who wanted to leave. Some of them had families and some of them didn't. I guess about half of them out. Then the communist forces started the rocketing of Bien Hoa and some marines were killed. So we had to close the airbase, the airport. It was too risky. So, we decided to go back to the barges to evacuate the people. On the 29th I finally got word that we were going to move them. It was difficult to get the word out to them but we got the word to as many of them as we could find. They all went down on this pier. There were probably several thousand people. We were loading them into barges. I can remember there was a Vietnamese military police officer. They have this emblem PC which is their MP. This was a huge guy, I think he was a captain. He had medals down to his belt and he was directing traffic. It just struck me how people did what they were supposed to do regardless of how hopeless things were. The police were still functioning on the streets; the traffic police. Things were reasonably orderly. We had this big mob down at the pier. Then we were loading them onto the barges. I can remember one very good province chief and his wife was there. He had two or three children, but he was in uniform. He's one that I really admired, very solid and he came up to me and asked if it was possible for him to get on the barge. He reached up and he ripped the insignias off his uniform, dropping them over the side. That really struck me. Then there was one of my local employees. After he got done loading, I turned to him and said are you going to get on? He said, no, I don't want to get on. I want to stay here. I took a key from one of our staff vehicles and said, you can take that vehicle over there, it's yours, good luck. He got in the vehicle and drove off. Then there was another little militia fellow. He had a rifle and just standing there keeping order. We were just about finished and we didn't have anyone else who wanted to get on the barge. I said do you want to get on the barge and he just looked up at me and said, no, this is my country, I'm staying here. It was very interesting and a horrible experience. Obviously I was disappointed that some local employees didn't get the word and didn't get down to the pier. We could have gotten everybody out. Anyhow, at that point I went back to the embassy with this fellow Paul Dailey from the first corps. The embassy, the streets were very quiet and very orderly and the police were still functioning. There was a quietness about the place and I didn't feel the hostility. But around the embassy there were a couple of thousand people. We had these big iron gates. The marines had been flown in I think from Okinawa. The marines made me more nervous than anybody else because the crowds was yelling. The marines didn't know whether they were going to get popped. I was afraid one of them was going to shoot somebody. Anyhow, we got back into the embassy. We got word that the president had ordered us to leave, everybody out by a certain time on the morning of the 30th. So, there were to be no Americans by 6:00 on April 30th. That came from the president. Graham Martin had asked whether people would be willing to stay. I had volunteered to stay with other members of the staff, but that present direction canceled that idea. A general, Big Minh, had taken over as president. He was the third president in a week. I think we had conveyed the message to him that we were willing to leave a skeleton staff at the embassy to negotiate some sort of relationship or whatever. The communist authorities got word back to him that we were to all leave. After that we closed the operation. I never felt threatened by the communists. It was clear to me that they were going to allow us to get out. I think that they didn't want to give any cause for us not to move our forces out.. So, they had halted on the outskirts, but they weren't pushing in. They were going to let us get out. It was just obvious. So, I remember coming up to the gate and there was this huge mob surrounding it. The only place that there was any activity. We had to figure out how to get in. We had a couple of locals with us. We got the attention of the marines, hey, you know, we're Americans, we're on the staff. Okay, come around the gate on the side and we're going to open that gate up and we're going to let you in. So, we went around to that gate. We thought at the time that we might be able to get more people in, but we didn't. I can remember there was a huge marine sergeant, staff sergeant or a master sergeant, he had a lot of stripes and he was a big guy. They had this little side gate and he said to the Vietnamese employees, you tell all the people around there that I'm going to open this gate and I'm going to put my fist out and the first person to step through this gate that I don't authorize is going to get this fist down his throat. He's standing there with his fist drawn and we four marched in and he slammed the gate shut and nobody moved near that gate. That's how we got back into the compound and we went back to reporting. At this point, Mark Garrett, the security officer finally struck and, without the ambassador's authorization, cut down this damn tree.

Q: That tree, I know the tree.

LAHIGUERA: Yes. We got rid of this tree. They brought in this large helicopter to land. The Americans were being evacuated off the top of the roof. But the Vietnamese were being evacuated by these large aircraft on the ground. I went to the back of the compound with Dailey. We got up on the wall and we had all these marine guards on the wall. They were just kids and looking very nervous and making me nervous. We looked over the wall. There was this mass of Vietnamese people screaming and waving. In the crowd we recognized some of our staff. So, we pulled some of them up over the wall. We told the marine guards these were our employees. Then we went back and forth. We got several of them over the wall. Then finally the order came down that we had to leave. There was going to be a lot of turmoil. They forced us away from the wall. We went in and then that's when I was told I had to leave. I really felt shitty. I felt we were running away from a third rate government, a communist force. That was just something I never thought I'd see in my life. So, I stayed there until they finally told me I should get on a helicopter. I had some sort of a weapon. The drill was to throw your weapon on a pile before you got on the helicopter. I had an automatic revolver. I wasn't going to go anywhere without that thing, without some sort of protection. You didn't know whether the helicopter was going to be shot down. So we got onto the helicopter and I remember flying off, it was late on the 29th. I remember landing on the Blue Ridge.

Q: This is a command check spot off the coast of South Vietnam?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. I can still remember the flight. We went over the logistics centers near Bien Hoa. They were all burning. You could see the fires for miles. It was very awesome. When we got out to the ship. I only had the clothes I was wearing. I didn't have my passport. I didn't have any money. I had my ID card and my State Department ID card and a few dollars. Just the suit I was wearing. I remember they searched me when I stepped off. They extracted my automatic revolver. They said I had to register it with them and could come and get it some other time. I never did. I'd brought flags out from Bien Hoa. I also had some piasters. I was carrying them in case we had to bribe police to let our staff go. I still had the flags. I had four flags. I had them in a little cellophane bag. I have them at home now and the piasters. I still have them stuck somewhere at home. I went down to the war room and I saw General Ky. That really upset and infuriated me. I have nothing against any Vietnamese getting out, but he had been on the radio a couple of nights before calling on every loyal red-blooded Vietnamese to fight the communists invaders down to the last man. That no true Vietnamese would desert his country in its hour of need. I wondered how many poor kids listened to this bloke out followed his advice. Then he got on that helicopter and fled. I was pretty unhappy with him. On board the ship I was bunked with Tom Polgar who was the CIA chief and with this woman, Burke, who was the consul general in Saigon. We were all sort of stuck together in this room. I was exhausted. I remember somebody shaking me and saying the ambassador is flying aboard, would you like to come up on the deck? I asked him sarcastically, is it washed? I still remember when the ambassador came on board. He had his valet and his damn dog. Here I had lost a lot of my employees because he never got around to being able to decide when to get the staff out, but he could get his dog out. I tell you if I had half a chance to throw that dog over the side, I would have done it. I was pretty unhappy about his dog getting on and members of my staff didn't.

I remember eating dinner that first night. We were eating spaghetti. I had an AID officer with me, Joe Deveier, a very dedicated officer who was with the third corps. Mr. Polgar joined us and he was rather bald. Polgar started to tell us about the problems of this friendly police commander of the Vietnamese police force. This poor police commander had left and he hadn't gotten his art collection out. I had visions of spaghetti dripping down that bald head. I put my arm on my friend Deveier's leg to restrain him. We quickly concluded dinner and walked away. Here we had just left staff behind and this guy's worrying about some guy who didn't get his art collection out. This was part of the difference between the fellows in Saigon and the people out in the field. I didn't feel they had proper concerns for the Vietnamese staff. I remember I had one previous encounter with personnel about evacuating people. I spoke to the personnel officer at the embassy before we started the evacuation. I met this woman and I told her how many people we had. She said, "Oh no, you only have two regular employees, regular staffers, all the rest of those people are just contract." I said, to her, "You know the communists aren't going to ask about whether they were contract or not before they execute them." This sort of distinction just boggled me.

Q: I think this is probably a good place to stop. We'll pick it up the next time. In 1975 you have left Saigon, you're on the Blue Ridge. You've talked about some of our immediate reactions towards Graham Martin and his dog and some of the others. Let's talk about what happened afterwards and how things went then.

Today is August 8, 2000. You're on the Blue Ridge. What was sort of the word of the people there?

LAHIGUERA: People generally were very despondent. We had Vietnamese aboard the Blue Ridge as well as Americans. We realized we had just lost this long struggle that many of us were so committed to. I was at a loss to understand what it meant and where I was going to go at this point. The people I was with in large part shared these emotions. We went from the Blue Ridge into Manila. I had no clothing but what I was wearing when I got on the helicopter. We landed in the Philippines and we managed to get to Manila and they gave me pants and a pay advance. I stayed there and got some clothing. Then they directed me to go to Guam. Dick Peterson was the consul general in Bien Hoa and had been the senior State representative in Guam. He had just left and I became the senior State person there. There were well over 100,000 refugees. An admiral in Guam was the principal leader of the operations of handling evacuees. Each of the agencies involved had to attend staff meetings. I spent a lot of time getting families together. We had a lot of military. The Vietnamese military had left Vietnam with Vietnamese aircraft. We encouraged that since it would take military aircraft out of Vietnam. I spent a lot of time trying to get the military personnel and their families back together. There were three or four camps. There was the problem of a person being in one camp and his wife and children in another. In fact I ran into Terry McNamara, he was the consul general in Can Tho. David Sciacchitano was also in Can Tho. I spent a month there. I finally had enough of it and I called the Department and said would you please get me out of here. The next morning there was a cable stating that I was required back in Washington on urgent business.

Q: Well, there must have been people who'd been evacuated that said hell I want to go back. I mean, you know, when you make a decision like this, it's done in a hurry and I would expect that there must have been some people who wanted to go back to Vietnam who had left family behind and all. Were there any indications of that?

LAHIGUERA: I don't recall anything like that. Certainly with all those numbers that phenomenon developed later. I know people on the staff of the consulate general who wanted to go back, but that came several years later, not immediately. Overwhelmingly the people were very thankful to be out. No, I can't say, in those days immediately after the evacuation that I ran into anybody who wanted to return.

Q: No, I was just thinking I mean sometimes you know the families

LAHIGUERA: Second thoughts.

Q: Second thoughts and people have been left behind and all.

LAHIGUERA: I'm not aware of any cases although I wouldn't be surprised.

Q: How did the system work? Did there seem to be a developing system for moving the refugees on?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, we set up a camp in Pennsylvania, one in I think Florida and another one in Arkansas. There were three camps and we shuttled them from Guam into these camps. I didn't get involved in that operation. I just felt I wanted to get away from it at that stage. So, when I went back to Washington they asked me if I'd like to go to Hong Kong and be an Indo China analyst. They had originally intended to send me and Charles Twining to Bangkok. Charlie Twining just finished studying Cambodian and they were going to have him as the Cambodian analyst and me as the Vietnamese analyst. The Thais at that point were putting pressure on us and there was some cooling in our relationship. The Thais wanted some kind of guarantee that if the Vietnamese continued to try to expand that we would give them a commitment to come to their aid and that wasn't forthcoming. There was some coolness in our relationship. In any event, our ambassador in Thailand felt we should start to cut personnel and it was decided to move my job to Hong Kong. So, I was assigned to consulate general Hong Kong. I arrived in August of '75. Chuck Cross was the consul general. The place was heavily staffed by China watchers. John Anderson was the chief political officer and I worked for him. But I was the only person in the political section, which must have had six or seven officers, who wasn't working on China.

Q: Were you there from '75 till?

LAHIGUERA: To '79. To July of '79.

Q: What were we getting out of particularly South Vietnam, I mean it had collapsed. We had expected a, what were we expecting?

LAHIGUERA: Politically it is hard for me to judge. We were concerned about the impact on the rest of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and Malaysia. The Chinese at that time were still supporting the Vietnamese, as were the Soviets. We were interested to see how; we were interested in developments in Cambodia as well. The Khmer Rouge had taken over in Phnom Penn. I always said that the Vietnamese were very fortunate in having the Cambodians next to them because compared to the Cambodians they looked like nice people. There was a Vietnamese presence in Hong Kong as well as a Cambodian presence. They had people there to conduct trade and shipping into both Vietnam and Cambodia. There was a flow of refugees from Vietnam. I don't recall any from Cambodia. I guess the Cambodians were principally going to Thailand. So, I was interested in the refugee flows. I had a lot of contact with the Hong Kong authorities on the question of refugees. We were certainly supporting the policy of giving them first asylum and we took the view that people with relatives in the United States or people brought into Hong Kong on American vessels would be taken care of by us essentially. We felt that whatever ship picked them up really should take care of them.

I was interested in debriefing refugees on conditions; I was interested in the fate of our staff in Vietnam. We had a continued interest on the MIA (Missing in Action) question and any sightings of Americans including any Americans who in fact stayed behind. There were those that just elected to stay behind. As I think I mentioned there was in Bien Hoa a young man who was working in a mental hospital. I also recall a priest who stayed behind, an American priest and quite a few others. So, we were interested in those kinds of thing. I followed the Vietnamese efforts to sell goods and to import goods. We had an embargo on American company trade with the Vietnamese. My presence was pretty well known in Hong Kong. I was active in the American Chamber of Commerce there, which is a large organization. They in fact formed a Vietnamese committee of people interested in Vietnam. Some of them had been in business in Vietnam and had left. Others were just looking for new opportunities. We managed to obtain information on what ships were going to Vietnam and what cargo they were bringing, so any time we noticed American goods we let it be known that that was illegal. I recall one ship going into Cambodia and it was carrying a large shipment of Kodak stuff. We had a customs representative in Hong Kong. The U.S. Customs Officer went to Kodak and told them that we were distressed about this. They assured us that they didn't know anything about it and they would look into it. We had a similar thing with Monsanto's shipping chemicals. No great harm would be done by Kodak selling film there, but when we did that the word got around very quickly in the American community that we were watching this kind of thing. I can remember one banker in particular saying, "Well, you know you're not going to stop shipments of stuff into these countries." I said, "Of course not, but it's going to cost the Vietnamese and the Cambodian communist governments an increase of 10% or 20% to buy through a middleman, then we've already achieved our objective. This is not a wartime embargo; it's an economic one." So, I got involved in that kind of thing. I did debrief a lot of refugees. I read the Vietnamese news agency broadcast every morning religiously. It was a chore that I really used to dread, but it was very interesting what you could draw from it. I also developed a range of business contacts who were going into Vietnam and Hong Kong. I used to visit foreign diplomats from Hanoi who would come down and do their R&R in Hong Kong including Australians, Indians, and Swedes. I can remember speaking to the Swedish aid people who were very frustrated. There was an agreement between the Swedes and the Vietnamese that any equipment that arrived became the property of the Vietnamese government. They'd bring in equipment and the Vietnamese would want to tax it going in. Then after that they'd take the equipment and say it's ours now and we'd rather put it on this other project that the Soviets are helping us with and not have it on your project. This used to just drive the Swedes wild. They had this huge paper mill that they were developing in the north of Vietnam. So, this is the kind of information I gathered in bits and pieces. It was interesting. I can't say that there was any major breakthroughs or that I made any great major discoveries.

I did notice that around '78 the Vietnamese had a party congress. All the people associated with the Chinese were removed as well as people supporting the ethnic minority programs. I didn't understand the link at first until I realized that the ethnic minorities in the north of Vietnam, I kept on thinking in terms of Montagnards, but the ethnic minorities in the north of Vietnam were largely out of China. So, they must have looked at these things as being linked. In any event, this was an early indicator that things were going sour between Vietnam and China. There was a gradual buildup of Soviet relations with Soviet aircraft going into the north and Soviet ships going into the Vietnamese ports. I think that's what really triggered the downward slide. Chinese continued to leave Vietnam including leaving through the north into China. The Chinese made some quite a bit of noise about this, but I think their real concern was the developing Vietnamese relationship with the Soviets and feeling circled by enemies.

Q: Obviously we must have been looking for the possibility of a conventional bloodbath after the revolution, after the North Vietnamese had taken over South Vietnam. What were we getting from that?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. We had these terrible reports out of Cambodia. I had very little information about what was going on in Cambodia, but it was obvious from what we had that it was very grim. We were concerned that similar events would occur in Vietnam. I was very pleased to see that it wasn't as bad as I thought it could have been. The first reports I got were about the women who were associated with American efforts, our former female staff. I heard that the women were given very brief reeducation as they called it, usually a month or two, and then released. I attributed this to a certain Asian chauvinist approach that women couldn't have done anything of any real concern so you didn't have to bother much with them. The male staff members had a much more difficult time. I did learn from refugees who did get out that male staff members were in reeducation for at least a year or more. Officers that I knew such as General Ba and General Dao were both in reeducation camps. I recall one particular figure I believe the governor of the central bank of Vietnam who had prevented President Thieu from absconding with the gold. Thieu had, I understand, a Swiss aircraft in Saigon he was going to take the gold on. I forgot how many millions of gold it was, but this gentleman had barred the president's access to the gold. The communists ended up getting the gold and after all that effort they threw this poor guy into reeducation as well. So, I guess that didn't count for a lot.

There were reports in Hong Kong that if you had money you could buy your way out. There were boats that would take people out and drop them off near Thailand or try to get them into Hong Kong. The British also set up flights between Hong Kong and Saigon to take out people who were connected to Hong Kong. I was able to talk to those kind of people. In general things were severe, difficult, but we didn't have the kind of mass executions that occurred in Phnom Penn.

Q: The land reform that happened up in North Vietnam in I guess the '50s when the villagers basically were given carte blanche to go after the land.

LAHIGUERA: In fact the communist government maintained the Republic of Vietnam piaster for quite some time. I had left with a bag full of this money. I didn't think anything of it. I thought it would be worthless the day we left. I had it as a souvenir and I would have gladly have given it away to the Vietnamese staff before I left if I had thought that it was worth anything. I was very sorry about that. I think it took them about two years before they changed to their new communist dong.

Q: Were you consulting with the China watchers on Chinese Vietnamese relationships? Was there much thought given to this?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Well, in fact this report I wrote on the deteriorating relationship between China and Vietnam sparked quite a bit of interest. We had started to normalize relations with China, we had a liaison office in Beijing at this time. The staff sent me up to visit it. I saw Ambassador Woodcock then, but things started going downhill. In '78 when I visited China, the people in our embassy in Beijing thought that I might be able to get near the Vietnamese border, which is what I would have liked to have done to be able to see for myself any military buildup. They decided that when I got to southern China I should apply for a permit to go from there to the border area and that I'd probably be turned down in Beijing. Anyhow, they wouldn't allow me near the border, but they did allow me to go to the refugee camp and I got an opportunity to interview the Chinese who came out of Vietnam. It was an eye opener to me. What the Chinese were complaining about, and I was certainly not one to be a great defender of the Vietnamese communists, was they wanted some sort of privileged minority status. They wanted a different kind of ID card. The Vietnamese wanted everybody to register and if you were going to live in Vietnam you should be a Vietnam citizen. That included being eligible to serve in the military. Well, they didn't want to serve in the military.

Q: They hadn't in the South Vietnamese system?

LAHIGUERA: These are Northern Chinese. These people had fled from the north. They didn't want to serve in the Vietnamese army and they didn't want to speak Vietnamese and they wanted to have some sort of special status and have their own schools and be left alone. They just wanted to live in Vietnam. I said to myself, well, I can see why the Vietnamese regarded this as unwelcome. Of course, I didn't say that to the Chinese. It didn't sound to me like they were being abused and the Vietnamese took the attitude of well, if you want to go to China, feel free to leave and they did. Of course the Chinese didn't feel they needed any more people. So, this is a bone of contention between the two countries. When I got back from this trip the Chinese had started moving forces towards the border. I can recall that I estimated there were about 1,000 aircraft moved south in the vicinity of the Vietnamese border. I knew at that point that this is not a bluff, this is not posturing. I filed what was to be my only real dissent cable in my career. At that juncture the consul general didn't see it my way. We didn't put it in the dissent channel, although it was originally written that way. He decided to send it in as another view from the consul general. The consensus of the China watchers was that the Chinese were very reasonable people and they were just concerned about these refugees and they were just trying to put some pressure on the Vietnamese. I said, no I thought that they were really concerned about a Soviet buildup in Vietnam. They really didn't care much about the refugees and they fully intended to attack. In December of '78, a China watcher, Sarah Ann Smith, and I wrote a joint cable, saying that the Chinese actions had vindicated our position. I felt satisfied with that. By that time I started meeting with the Chinese officials or semi- officials in Hong Kong. One particular gentleman was specializing on Vietnamese affairs. So, I mean he knew who I was and I knew who he was. The day after the Chinese attacked the border in February of '79 he invited me to lunch. I can recall arriving at the lunch and he was sitting at the table already waiting for me and he was beaming. So, I went in and sat down and he didn't know what to say and he finally looked up to me and said, "Well, what do you think?" I paused and I thought it over a while and I finally said to him, "I think it's pretty good that you're just four years too late." He laughed. I hoped that they reported that as such. But, I can still recall from our conversation that we were in discussions of normalizing relations with Vietnam ourselves. He expressed some very strong views of his disapproval of such a move. He noted we were normalizing relations with China and that pressing to be friendly with these abusive Vietnamese probably would not be taken well in Beijing. I think that attitude had a certain influence on our terminating the exercise. I don't say it was that factor alone, but I certainly think it was relevant.

Q: Hong Kong had developed this China monitoring system, highly sophisticated, getting newspapers and listening to news and interviewing people and all and they had a staff that filtered it out and it's kind of still going on even though we had people up in Beijing at that time and it still for some years remained our major way of finding out what was going on in China. Were you kind of there by yourself though on Vietnam; was there another closed society?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. I was a sort of a one man band and my contacts were people who really were interested or had business links with Vietnam when the Vietnamese were approaching for credit or barter arrangements or that kind of thing. I also followed the Laotians. I went over to Bangkok from time to time as well and met with Charles Twining and we went up to refugee camps and talked to the refugees.

Q: You must have been concerned about all the military equipment that ended up in the North Vietnamese hands?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. One of the disappointments was what happened to the military equipment in Da Nang. We had this mass of fighter aircraft that were all set to be flown off. The Vietnamese pilots instead of flying them off took their families and got on the boats. When the communists arrived they found these aircraft all set up and ready to go. We lost aircraft in Bien Hoa air base as well. I did debrief former military ARV people who got out on the status of the aircraft. The Vietnamese weren't able to maintain and they couldn't get spare parts for much of the aircraft, so it was of limited use. I would think that they have a 100 years supply of artillery however. The aircraft was a more perishable kind of commodity.

Q: Was there any indication that our equipment was being used against the Chinese?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. They used '70s aircraft certainly including against the Cambodians when the invaded Cambodia setting up a new government. That was also during the same time.

Q: How were you seeing the Vietnamese/Cambodian relationship in this '75 to '79 period?

LAHIGUERA: Well, originally, when Pol Pot first took over, there wasn't any obvious break in relations. Things slowly went downhill along the Vietnamese Cambodian border. Frictions, clashes developed and it just slowly deteriorated. But historically they hated each other, so it wasn't a surprise.

Q: Did you have the feeling that in a way that you were looking at Vietnam. I mean, here is a place that we had spent lots of lives, lots of our money and all and this was a focal point of our foreign policy for over ten years and all. Then all of a sudden it disappears.

LAHIGUERA: Yes, it certainly was erratic. In fact, Charlie Twining and I used to say that we two replaced Graham Martin and his cast of thousands. Yes. It went from one extreme to another. Of course, in our realignment, our new relationship with China changed the whole picture and Vietnam became really of marginal interest. I mentioned previously, we made quite a bit of effort with the refugees on the questions of MIAs and also with travelers, people like the Swedes. We were always looking for Americans. I had worked with joint casualty resolution center people in Vietnam and they used to come to Hong Kong as well. So, we were always being urged to see if we could find out anything about Americans. I always thought that they would surface. I was very skeptical about prisoners remaining from the war period, but I expected that deserters would surface. There were reports of an anti-communist insurgency trying to reorganize and I was concerned about Americans going back to support that kind of activity. In fact there were Americans who wanted to go back to get their families out. So, that was another question. I thought there would be a good chance that there would be Americans arrested in the post-war period. We did get some reports from people in the North of seeing Americans. I recall a Swede telling me about a black farmer who apparently spoke English and he was out plowing the fields. That he didn't look like he was a prisoner, he looked like had a farm and a family there. The Swede tried to talk to him and he just ran away. I was very skeptical that there would have been any prisoners because it would have just caused a lot of embarrassment to the Vietnamese government and there was no advantage in their keeping them once the war was over. So, I didn't take the Rambo kinds of things very seriously, but I certainly did take seriously the possibility that Americans were there under other conditions.

Q: Well, as we both know that during a war they had developed a considerable deserter colony in Saigon hidden away where GI's were selling dope and you know, sort of living under cover with a girlfriend involved.

LAHIGUERA: Well, when I was in Bien Hoa we had information on somebody whom we believed was a MIA, who was listed as an MIA. I tried to make arrangements to have him photographed just to show that he wasn't a prisoner somewhere, but he was in fact on the loose. We never were successful in getting a picture of him. We had people who described him. There were a lot of these kinds and reports of these kinds of characters running around.

Q: What sort of apparatus were you reporting to back in Washington? Was there sort of a Vietnamese desk?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, Jim Rosenthal was our original desk officer and then he was replaced by Steve Lyon, a director from Vietnam and Bob Miller was our deputy assistant secretary over all of these kinds of divisions. So, they would get our reporting and they would send me instructions on any particular thing that they would like me to focus on.

Q: Well, is there anything else you should talk about during this time?

LAHIGUERA: I can't say that there was any particular event after the invasion. I was amazed by the press at that time, I'm talking about the invasion of the Chinese into Vietnam. The press made a lot of noise about how it was really a victory for Vietnam because of the high Chinese casualties. That kind of comment was surprising. I couldn't believe Beijing being worried very much about casualties. I thought that the invasion was pretty much a success in sending a message to the Vietnamese that they were very vulnerable to China and better behave. The Vietnamese were fearful of China, China being their traditional colonial boss. They always had this historic fear that they would come back as Ho Chi Minh did. You might like to know that Ho Chi Minh organized the Vietnam communist party in Hong Kong and had the first party congress in Macao. He was arrested by the British and then eventually released. But they had to sneak him out of the colony because they were afraid the French would assassinate him to prevent him from returning to Indo China. I met actually one lady who had met Ho Chi Minh while he was there.

Q: Well, were Vietnamese politics raging in Hong Kong. I mean were these just people that the Vietnamese had got to Hong Kong just waiting to get the hell out.

LAHIGUERA: Most of the refugees that made it to Hong Kong were ethnic Chinese and they had no interest in Vietnam once they got out. Most of them were economic refugees and they would largely like to go to the United States. We had some problem and friction with the Hong Kong government because we weren't willing to take everybody that came out. There wasn't any Vietnamese activism in Hong Kong directed against Vietnam. That didn't develop at all or I would have heard about that. I'm sure of that. It was interesting to see how the attitude in the Hong Kong business community changed significantly after the Chinese government became hostile to the Vietnamese. Then suddenly the businessmen and the American Chamber of Commerce were pretty well decided that they weren't interested in Vietnam and in fact weren't sure that they had ever been. It sort of, this whole effort vanished overnight. That was amusing.

Q: Were you getting any reflection of, I mean there had been a major anti-American movement both in the United States and Europe and all against our involvement in the war and cheers for Ho Chi Minh and all. Did these activists try to head out for Vietnam for the new workers paradise and all that?

LAHIGUERA: I didn't see much of that kind of thing. It seemed to me, after the war, especially on the American side, there was a great loss of interest on what was happening there. I didn't notice any concerns about human rights in Vietnam after we were out in contrast to all the noise that had been made before. I do remember there was an Italian journalist at the Far East National Tribune, Tiziano Terzani, I think he's the editor now. He may have just left. He who wrote a book on the fall of Saigon. He also wrote for the Spiegel, which is funny. I remember I had great pleasure in telling him first how I bought his book in Taiwan. He got the point; he didn't get any royalties on my purchase. I then enumerated all the mistakes he had made in the book. He had written something of a sympathetic presentation of the communists. He went back to Vietnam after the election, after the Vietnamese communists finally set up some sort of election machinery. When he came back again he was very disillusioned. I have to give him credit, he did criticize the new regime. I found that the foreign journalists took a far more serious interest in what was going on than the Americans. They were interesting to talk to and they would ask me far more interesting questions. The Americans tended to call me up and ask me what was new. That was the kind of question I would get while the reporters from the Guardian had really very penetrating questions.

Q: Well, by '79 were you actually getting a little bit fed up with Vietnam?

LAHIGUERA: Yes, but I was still quite interested in Southeast Asia. I was up for reassignment. The deputy principal officer in Hong Kong, Burt Levin went to Bangkok to become the DCM and I expressed an interest to him in being the principal officer in Northeast Thailand. He supported that and I ended up actually getting that job.

Q: So, you were in Udorn from when to when?

LAHIGUERA: I left Hong Kong in '79. So after a year at FSI I left for Thailand in the summer of '80.

Q: So, you were there until when?

LAHIGUERA: '80 to '82. Yes. To the summer of '82.

Q: What was happening in Udorn at this point? We had, or maybe we had dismantled our air bases and all that sort of thing?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. The Thais cooled towards us. We were trying to go somewhere else. We had no military units other than a defense attaché's office and a military assistance there.

In the summer of '80 there was still reaction to the aftermath of our departure of Vietnam. The Thais were very concerned about any Vietnamese threat. They are traditionally concerned about the Vietnamese influence in Laos and Cambodia. That was the main focus of our military that I spoke to. Nothing happened that really got people too excited, but we were just keeping a careful eye on the Vietnamese and on the Lao governments. We had a lot of refugee camps there as well. These were indigenous tribes from Laos. We had many Lao camps. These people just had to cross the Mekong which was really a very easy thing to do. Then we had a Cambodian camp in the southern part of our district along the Cambodian border in Surin. All these camps had political operators of some kind. The anti-communist Cambodians were operating in the very corner of Thailand, where Laos meets with Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge were operating. In one camp there were people who were tending fields in Laos. They would come down to live in the camps in Thailand, but they planted their crops in Laos and then come back to the camp. So, you had this constant flow back and forth. There was always some type of activity going on. We were processing refugee applications from all these camps. I was concerned about the welfare of the refugees and how they were being treated. I got them some support from our refugee processing people. We did provide support from our embassy. They would send vehicles over to us for maintenance and that sort of stuff. I was very much interested in the activities of the Thai communist party. The Thai communist party was really dying. My personal feeling is that thanks to our efforts in Vietnam, the Thai communist party never got off the ground. I think it had been more successful earlier. We didn't have any serious insurgencies. There were some minor incidents.

Q: Was there at your level a coolness of Thai officials?

LAHIGUERA: Oh, not at all. They were very, very cordial. I had great access. I met every governor in the northeast. I met all the generals and many of the senior staff members. We spent a lot of time together discussing conditions in Thailand including security concerns. We had the aid projects in the north. Ambassador Abramowitz was there first as my chief of mission and then he was replaced by John Gunther Dean who came up and visited some of the aid projects. There was a lot of activity. I suppose the most exciting event when I was there; there was an offensive coup. Ambassador Abramowitz was still there. I went down to Korat to meet the general who was in charge of the forces. After my meeting with the general I went out to dinner and drinks with his chief of intelligence. I can remember we must have stayed out until 1:00 in the morning just talking and drinking. My last question to the colonel before I left for my hotel was there had been rumors about dissatisfaction among the young Turk colonels. Did he think that there was the threat of a coup? He didn't, he said no he hadn't heard anything. So, I went back to the hotel. The next morning the coup occurred. I'm sure that the Thais thought that I had some inside information. I never even tried to argue with them. You know, they just took it for granted that the Americans know everything. That's their basic approach to life. That was a very interesting time. The colonels grabbed Bangkok and they thought they had everything under control. There were certain rules of the game for a coup. It's sort of seize everything and people take sides and then you count tanks and whoever has the most things wins. What happened in this case was the king was in Bangkok and got into his car. The king liked to drive. The king was really a sacred entity and he got in his car and he drove out of the city. There were no Thais anywhere who would dare go up against the king. He just simply drove to Korat where I was and no one was willing to stop him. I understand that General Prin, who was the Prime Minister at that time, had been arrested by one of the colonels. I wasn't there, but I was told later that when he was put under arrest, the queen called and a colonel explained to the queen that General Prin had been arrested and was being held at gunpoint by another colonel. The queen asked to speak to the colonel and the poor colonel got on the phone with the queen and she was giving him the what for. While she was berating the poor colonel, Prin walked out the door. The colonel didn't know what to do because he couldn't hang up on the queen. Meanwhile, the king got in his car and he drove. I had been talking to my friend, the chief of Thai intelligence, the previous evening and he was conveying to me all their plans and developments. When I was calling this information down to the embassy the phone line went dead. I was speaking to Jim Wilson who was the political counselor. Jim and I had served together in Munich. I was conveying to him all the developments in German. Of course, if the colonels had our phones tapped, they could eventually know what we were saying, but this was very perishable kind of stuff. It may take them a while to dig up a Thai who could speak German. The next day the king and the Prime Minister who were in Korat squashed the whole thing. I think only one poor fellow was killed and this was by accident when somebody fired a gun at a roadblock to get their car to stop. That was the only casualty of the whole coup. That was a very exciting time. I was in a very serious situation where I was the only contact with the Thai government up in Korat because they had all moved up to Korat. The embassy was relaying messages offering to assist and of course we wanted a peaceful resolution. We wanted to restore the elected government. One surprising element in this period was that the queen came out on the radio attacking the coup and that was regarded by the Thais as not very proper. That caused a little bit of pain.

Q: Who was our ambassador in Thailand at the time and how did he use you?

LAHIGUERA: When I arrived it was Morton Abramowitz. He was really focused on refugees. He really became Mr. Refugee. His wife was a super activist among the refugees that she dealt with in the camps. His staff was very refugee oriented. So, we were expected to give support to the refugees and to monitor positions of refugee camps. I did a lot of internal and domestic reporting. I would say I reported on a large percentage on the members of parliament. I wrote some stuff on who was going to win elections, covered bread and butter issues and tried to recruit candidates for USIS grants for the United States and that kind of thing. So, I did some domestic reporting. It all went pretty well I think. I talked to members of the political parties on all sides. General [inaudible] also had come up to my area and he became elected as the member of parliament from a province in the northeast. So, we had him as a presence and many of the political figures. I think the present prime minister was also a candidate in my area at one point. So, I got to meet a lot of the folks there. The "political figures." After John Gunther Dean came there was less focus on refugees more on the aid side and our political relations. I think they were probably a bit more interested in my political reporting.

Q: Do you sense a concern to keep Thailand in the whatever you want to call it, the democratic camp or at least out of the communist camps?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. As I mentioned before we did have a military aid program. The ties were very cordial. I think the one thing they weren't going to agree to would be the presence of the U.S. military because they thought that invited them as a target. But aside from that I think they wanted to have good relations with us politically and certainly encourage American tourists. American trade was of great interest. I had nothing but cooperation from the officials on the political on the military side.

Q: You mentioned tourists. Around this time I guess it continued before that, too, Bangkok was sort of the sex capital of everywhere, I mean, the Japanese, the Germans had special sex life practically going in there. Did sex rear its ugly head or did your staff have any problems like that or were you sort of out of the line of fire?

LAHIGUERA: Northeast Thailand makes a great contribution to this trade, they provide most of the women. We'd get a minimum number of tourists. There were some archeological diggings that people were interested in and we had the Surin elephants show, but aside from that there wasn't any major tourist attraction in the northeast. I didn't have problems on that side. We did have a modest number of retired American military living with their Thai wives. Many of them had alcohol and other problems. I managed to meet them all and straighten out some of their problems.

Q: Was Thailand beginning to become an economic tiger at this point? What was your impression of the Thais as opposed to the Vietnamese as far as economics?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I think the real economic surge in Thailand was right after I left. It was beginning, but I can't say that it was really in full bloom yet and in the northeast they have a great deal of poverty. This area is almost totally dependent upon agriculture. We were concerned to some degree about the growing of things like marijuana, and we did have the DEA (Drug Enforcement Agency) come from time to time. We were concerned about smuggling drugs across into Laos. We were really small potatoes. I was most concerned about furthering the development of the area than anything else.

Q: Well, then in 1982 whither?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was time for me to move again. I can remember I was on the road and I got a message from my communicator saying that you've been asked if you want to be DCM in "I think Switzerland." After some back and forth, it ended up being Swaziland. I was asked to be the DCM in Swaziland. I was originally offered a job to be the political military officer in Panama, but that fell through. That's a story all by itself. So, I ended up taking this job in Swaziland. There was a political appointee Robert Phinny was appointed as ambassador. He was a Republican businessman from Michigan and they wanted somebody experienced to go with him to Mbabane which is the capital. I accepted the job.

Q: So, you were in Swaziland from '83 to?

LAHIGUERA: To '85.

Q: In a way having dealt with Southeast Asia and all this would have been a little bit of a relaxation, rest or come down or what?

LAHIGUERA: It was going from one kingdom to another for starters, that was the similarity. In addition we had the African National Congress operating against the South Africans. We also had Mozambique next door. Swaziland borders Mozambique and South Africa. There were some stories; in fact our embassy staff expedited my getting there. Our embassy staff in Maputo had fled into Swaziland. Swaziland was an interesting place. It was a very prosperous island in the middle of Southern Africa. The Swazis fancy themselves as the Switzerland of Southern Africa. That's a bit of a stretch, but it is a lovely place. The capital of Mbabane is about 4,000 feet up. The country became independent in 1968 and its king was a gentleman by the name of Sobhuza, II. He had died just before I arrived, just a few weeks before I arrived. He had about 90 wives and he had over 100 children. He was really something of a semi-God to the people. He was a very cautious, wise, well-balanced man from what I could see and heard. He ruled after Swazi gained independence and they didn't go into promoting radical change. There were many British; it was originally a British protectorate. Many South Africans invested in the place and they had a fairly substantial tourist trade. It was very active and had some of the most modern sugar plantations in the world. They had the largest man made forest in the world until the Brazilians built a forest larger than Swaziland. The Swazis couldn't catch up. This is a country of a half a million people, a little bigger than Kuwait, but smaller than Massachusetts. I arrived when they were in mourning. I found the place very interesting. We had a FBIS (Foreign Broadcast Information Service) station there that was monitoring all the open broadcasts out of South Africa, Mozambique and Africa in general. I got some good political coverage from those events. It was an interesting window to see how things were developing both in South Africa and in Mozambique. I didn't do a lot of reporting on it, but found it quite interesting. The Swazis had a very traditional government. They had only this one leader and most of the population was very content under their system. They had a parliament during the British days. Then they were granted independence. They had a constitution and the king had suspended of parts of the constitution except the part dealing with the judiciary.

Q: This was a new king?

LAHIGUERA: No, the old king. So, when I arrived they were in this state; the political parties had been banned. The Swazi view of things was that they were a small community and they didn't want to have one side against the other. Their idea of settling problems was getting everybody involved in a room and talk it to death and then come up with some sort of consensus. They thought that was a much healthier way of resolving problems than slugging it out and voting on it. I must admit I had great reservations writing the human rights report. There is a certain vocal arrogance in writing a human rights report. It just struck me that their society was relatively happy, punching away. But because they didn't run their government and conduct government the way we do, they were inferior, undemocratic. Their system of government is that the king and his mother ruled at the same time. When the mother dies, as Sobhuza's mother had already died, the king and his senior wife, the senior wife replaces the mother as co-sovereign. When the king dies which is what happened when I was there, the senior wife became the regent. Then royal family, the immediate family and the royal members meet and they discuss and discuss and discuss and they form a consensus of who should be the next king. There is no automatic selection of the king. So, they were in the process of trying to decide who of Sobhuza's children should be king. Their preference was to have an infant be the king and to raise an infant as king from the beginning from infancy. Sobhuza didn't have any infants, he was in his 80's, but he had some quite young children. They finally selected a young man. They first made him the crown prince and he eventually became king, Mswati III. In the meantime when he was selected his mother, Ntombi, became the regent in place of Sobhuza's senior wife. The whole apparatus is surrounded by counselors and the system is that the king makes a lot of the executive decisions with his prime minister, but there's always the traditional channels of appeal through his mother and through the wives.

Q: I can just see you're trying to puzzle this out and put it into a sort of check list off of a human rights or something, you know?

LAHIGUERA: Yes. Actually I got very much involved in this. The Swazis, the royal family is very secretive about how they go about business and the average Swazi doesn't really know how decisions are made. I'm talking about decisions impacting on the royal family, but the government is a different matter. The government was a blend of tradition and parliamentary government. There were white Swazis, Englishmen, who were members of the parliament and the government had white ministers. One of the speakers was a white Brit originally and they have made a great effort and have continued to make a great effort in balancing both sides. This is a country that is 95% black, 95% Swazi, but they welcomed white participation in the economy and in the government. Outside of South Africa they have one of the highest standards of living in Africa as well as having good health conditions. They had abundant food. Anything you wanted you can buy there. Their money was interchangeable with the South African Rand, and they had a proper relationship, correct relationship with South Africa. While I was there the South Africans set up a trade office and the head of the trade office was a Foreign Service Officer from the South African Foreign Ministry, so he was obviously in the sense their ambassador. It was a very interesting period. I could talk a long time about just the structure of the society and how it functioned. They have two different sets of laws. They have polygamy, which is permitted, and a woman can be married under the traditional system or could be married with a modern judge or priest or whatever. Some members of this parliament and the government had one wife and some had several. We had dinner with all these folks and had some of them over. Some of them always came with the same wife. I can remember one colonel who became head of the army. Every time he came to dinner at my house he had a different wife, so I just got used to it. I thought it was interesting, sort of starting all over to meet another one. But, you had this very interesting mixture of how I approached them. We had a large aid presence. We sent quite a few Swazis to be educated in the United States. In fact the present Prime Minister of Swaziland, Barnabas, was educated in the United States. He's an accountant and he was a minister, finance minister when I was there.

Q: How did that work I mean sometimes the United States can spoil somebody, you know, coming back full of American piss and vinegar and wanting to change things around. How did, not just him, but other American educated people?

LAHIGUERA: I don't think it was a problem. Swazis are very conservative people. I used to say they were lovers, not fighters. The fire-eaters would be more likely to come from the South African University people who were influenced by the ANC. There was an ANC presence, which they went along with. What the Swazis didn't permit were any anti-South African activities. Activities on either side. They felt that they were a neutral area and they were in favor of a democratic rule in South Africa and they didn't want any operations against South Africa to be conducted from Swaziland. While I was there the South African government in fact attempted to cede to Swaziland the area between Swaziland and the ocean on the East Coast. The area south of Mozambique. The South African government had felt it needed to cede the property and the Swazis had accepted it and the Zulu tribe sued in court. The court found that the South African government hadn't followed the proper procedures and the Zulus claimed this territory was legitimately part of the Zulu area. As a result the land transfer didn't take place, but it was an interesting example of how business was done there and how their relationship was. They got along and when the senior Swazis became ill they were all evacuated to the hospitals in South Africa. It was just an interesting situation.

Q: Well, you had a political ambassador, his name was Phinny?

LAHIGUERA: Phinny, Robert Phinny.

Q: Where is he from, what was his background?

LAHIGUERA: He was a businessman and he was from Michigan. I think he fell within the lines of the Gerald Ford group. He was a contributor. He was very interested in Africa and he was an older gentleman and he related well with the personalities in government. His wife was an absolute angel who got along very well with the people there.

Q: During the time you were there, was the government of Mozambique fishing or trying to create troubled waters in Swaziland or were there any problems from that side?

LAHIGUERA: Mozambique had some sort of war going on and we were interested in it as well. They were much too tied up with their own internal problems to be worried about us. While I was there I was able to drive into Maputo. We had a chargi¹/₂ there who I stayed with in a beach house for a weekend. When you went to Mozambique you had to bring all your food with you because you couldn't buy anything. I can remember when I drove in I'd hit a pothole and the car bounced so much that the battery cracked. The embassy had a motor boat and I had to borrow their battery and try to get my car home. Then I sent them a new battery.

During my last year there I was the chargé. Bob Phinny left and the anti-government forces in Mozambique cut the roads into Swaziland and so we weren't able to go in there anymore. We did have some problems with refugees coming out of there. So, I was back in the refugee business and I had a lot of meetings with the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) representative. There were refugees from South Africa as well in Swaziland, but we got an influx of refugees from Mozambique at that time as well.

Q: Well, then in '85, did Swaziland find any part in what was it, the policy at that time called constructive engagement?

LAHIGUERA: Constructive engagement. Chet Crocker was our assistant secretary.

Q: Were we sort of looking at this through your Swazi contacts, were they telling you how this thing was going or not?

LAHIGUERA: Well, the Swazi government is very sympathetic to our approach. They themselves were trying to do the best they could to get along and to work with the South Africans. I think they would foster any meetings between the South Africans and ourselves and the rest of the African states. So, I viewed Swaziland as an opportunity to demonstrate what free market economy and investment could do in Southern Africa. I was hopeful that we could encourage more investments there. My own feeling was that if the economy grew the majority of the people would be drawn more and more into the economy and would take on more management roles. I thought this was a very constructive way to go through change. I'm not convinced that we were wrong.

Q: Well, then in '85 whither then?

LAHIGUERA: At that stage from the summer of '84 to '85 I was the chargé there, I was assigned to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, ICAF here in Washington, DC for a year.

Q: How did you find that?

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was very interesting. One of our speakers who came there, spoke both at ICAF and at the National War College, both are part of the National Defense University. We had a great variety of speakers. They would speak to the joint student body. It was very interesting. Secretary Kissinger came and Secretary Schultz. There were always members of the joint chiefs of staff and there was a great cross section from the government into class. Of course I'd been in the navy before so I was accustomed to being with military personnel. There were people from NSA (National Security Agency) and CIA and a lot of DOD present there and other organizations. It was a very good opportunity to exchange experiences and views. While I was there I had participated in the shipbuilding seminar and we went out to Korea and Japan to study their construction of ships. I'd never been to Korea before and I got out to the DMZ (demilitarized zone). I also did a seminar that sent us to Singapore and Malaysia. There was a nice variety of personalities and different groups and from different agencies. Very interesting experience. I enjoyed that.

Q: Well in '86 what happened?

LAHIGUERA: Well, at that point I thought it was time to go to the Department. As you might have noticed I didn't spend much time in the Department. In fact while I was at the ICAF I got a phone call from personnel and they asked me if I wanted to be the consul general in Salzburg. I said how much time do I have to give you an answer and they said we're going to decide in two hours, call me back. I remember calling my wife and saying, "would you like to go to Salzburg?" She said, "Who's the last person you've heard of being promoted out of Salzburg?" You know, it would be the end and it wouldn't be a very good place to look for a job unless you're a musician. So, she managed to persuade me that that as wonderful as the place might be, it wasn't really a good career move. Almost with tears in my eyes I called back and said, no thank you. I could not imagine when I was a student in Georgetown that I would someday turn down the consul general in Salzburg, but I'm doing it. Mort Abramowitz was the director of INR (Bureau of Intelligence and Research) and I ended up on the INR staff as an intelligence liaison office. My responsibility there was following special operations in Africa where I'd just come from and Asia and Europe. Those three areas and I eventually inherited the Middle East because the fellow who was doing it had left.

Q: So, you were doing this from when about '86 to?

LAHIGUERA: Let's see. '86 to '88.

Q: What at that time was meant by special operations?

LAHIGUERA: Well, actually the correct term was covert operations. The system is such that if the president wants to approve a covert operation then you have to sign something called a finding, which would approve something.

Q: I notice you didn't get Latin American in your choice.

LAHIGUERA: No, no, a gentleman by the name of Jon Wiant who is still in the Foreign Service took care of Latin America. I had no former experience in Latin America and I was happy to stay away from it.

Q: One thinks about the efforts to open up to get our hostages out of Beirut and the efforts of Ollie North and others to give missiles to the Iranians and all this. Did that fall in your bailiwick at all?

LAHIGUERA: Nothing that he did ever came to our attention. He never told us any of these actions or plans.

Q: I realize I'm treading on sensitive ground at this point. So, I'm going to just ask, is there anything we can discuss?

LAHIGUERA: Well, this was a very interesting period for me because in addition to getting reporting on the areas I was responsible for I had other policy opportunities. We had weekly meetings with the assistant secretary or usually his principal deputy assistant secretary and their counterpart in the CIA. They would come over and discuss matters of mutual interest of any nature. I was supposed to attend these meetings as a representative of Mort Abramowitz. So, I got an opportunity to meet Chas Freeman who was the principal deputy assistant secretary in AF and Chet Crocker who was his boss. Then in NEA Ambassador Murphy and Ed Djerejian who was his principal deputy who I might add was also a graduate of Georgetown. I remembered him as a student there. In EUR, Roz Ridgeway was the assistant secretary. I can't remember who was the DAS. Because of matters of internal difficulties things didn't work out as well in East Asia. I got involved in a lot of meetings at the director level, but the assistant secretary, Gaston Sigur, never seemed to be available for any of these meetings with us. So, that didn't work out so well. But, it was an interesting time and it showed me there was a resolution mechanism if there was disagreement with the agency. We would raise these issues in this meeting and then I would also prepare agendas for meetings with Ambassador Abramowitz and sometimes the Secretary for meetings with the agencies as well. So, I mention all this because it was a way that the Department exchanges views and communicates with the agency on these policy matters. I found it very interesting. Yes, you got everything from placating the ambassador when the chief of station fell asleep during the staff meetings to very serious disagreements on whether we should undertake certain operations in a country or not.

Q: Also, maybe we were beginning of the end of the period where William Casey was the Director of the CIA, who usually with others who might say of his ilk were advocating a very full policy of doing activist covert activities. Casey was an ex-OSS operator. That spirit seemed to prevail which caused a hell a lot of trouble for the Reagan administration. Were you noticing that, was this something that the State Department was concerned about, we were getting, doing a little too much covertly that maybe could be done overtly?

LAHIGUERA: Not in the programs I was involved with. I don't think that people felt that they were being overdone. I think they were very conservative and I think they were very cautious. I wouldn't say this was a very activist time. I think we were still recovering from involvement in Vietnam and I think things were pretty quiet. Casey died while I was there, early on while I was there. Actually the programs that were proposed were fairly modest and our major focus, let me say, was in Angola and Afghanistan.

Q: These are essentially quite well known.

LAHIGUERA: Yes. So, depending on how you view those activities, but I wouldn't say that they were any kind of Terry and the Pirates kind of thing.

Q: Well, then in NEA whither?

LAHIGUERA: Well, I ended up coming over to the career transition office and I worked on the staff as a career counselor.

Q: You did that for how long?

LAHIGUERA: Two years.

Q: '88 to?

LAHIGUERA: To '90.

Q: To '90.

LAHIGUERA: I retired in December of '90.

Q: What was your impression of the career transition office?

LAHIGUERA: Well, when we started this conversation I said I enjoyed every job I had and I enjoyed that one as well. I thought that the staff was superb there. The people are very dedicated in trying to help people find new things to do, find new careers if they wanted it. It gave me an opportunity to meet a great cross section of people who had been in the State Department and USIS. I enjoyed trying to find jobs for them. I used to edit the job openings list that was published. It was a very interesting worthwhile experience.

Q: Do you think there was a good fit of people who left the Foreign Service? I'm talking about the broad Foreign Service and the civilian world.

LAHIGUERA: Well, it was hard making an adjustment after somebody had been in the government that long to adjust into the civilian world if I can put it that way. People who were very senior or well-known people like Mort Abramowitz and Roz Ridgeway didn't need help from us. They got plenty of offers on their own. People who had administrative and management experience were pretty attractive. Then after that it was just dependent upon the nature and the character of the person involved and what they wanted to do. We gave Foreign Service Officers three months of transition period and it gave them a chance to organize and to think of what they wanted to do next; to develop their resume and get some practice on how they would present themselves and to start looking around. It wasn't so traumatic as just retiring them. I think it was very constructive. I saw some people find some very interesting jobs. Most people had ended up making their own opportunities. That's what one does in life. I think it was a very healthy program. Even people who didn't find jobs right away were given a chance to adjust to the idea of retiring.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

End of interview